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# Gold Griot: Jean-Michel Basquiat Telling (His) Story in Art

Ross, Lucinda

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University of Plymouth

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**RESEARCH DEGREES WITH  
PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY**

**Gold Griot:  
Jean-Michel Basquiat Telling (His) Story in Art**

by

**Lucinda Ross**

A thesis submitted to Plymouth University  
In partial fulfilment for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

Humanities and Performing Arts Doctoral Training Centre

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**Gold Griot:**  
**Jean-Michel Basquiat Telling (His) Story in Art**

**Lucinda Ross**



Basquiat, *Gold Griot*, 1984

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## **Gold Griot: Jean-Michel Basquiat Telling (His) Story in Art**

**Lucinda Ross**

### **Abstract**

Emerging from an early association with street art during the 1980s, the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat was largely regarded within the New York avant-garde, as 'an exotic other,' a token Black artist in the world of American modern art; a perception which forced him to examine and seek to define his sense of identity within art and within society. Drawing upon what he described as his 'cultural memory,' Basquiat deftly mixed together fragments of past and present, creating a unique style of painting, based upon his own experiences of contemporary American life blended with a remembering of an African past.

This study will examine the work of Basquiat during the period 1978 – 1988, tracing his progression from obscure graffiti writer SAMO© to successful gallery artist.

Situating my study of Basquiat's oeuvre in relationship to Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic, I will analyse Basquiat's exploration of his cultural heritage and depiction of a narrative of Black history, which confronts issues of racism and social inequality, and challenges the constraints of traditional binary oppositions. I will examine Basquiat's representation of the icon of the griot; narrator of African history and mythical talisman, shedding new light on the artist's reclamation of this powerful totem. Traversing the perimeters of the Black Atlantic I show how Basquiat's work has influenced both fine art and urban cultural practice in Britain.

Through analysis of Basquiat's self-portraits I will examine his repositioning the black subject, literally and historically, within the tradition of painting, and argue that through this relocation, Basquiat's work contributes to models of reparative histories. I will consider Basquiat's processes of identification and his refusal to be labelled 'a black artist,' situating his visual construction of self identity in relation to a post-black aesthetic.

Analysis of Basquiat's paintings lies at the heart of my research, and I conclude my study with an in-depth consideration of three paintings created by the artist during the final year of his life which characterise the enduring themes within his expansive body of work.

My research contributes to existing scholarship into the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat, providing original insight into the work of this important artist.

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I dedicate this thesis to Redley K. Ross as a reminder that anything is possible in life.

Finally, this project would not have existed without the inspiration that is Jean-Michel Basquiat; a truly great artist.

*'You're a book that I have opened, and now I've got to know much more...'*

Massive Attack, *Unfinished Sympathy*, 1990

## Author's Signed Declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without the prior agreement of the Graduate Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at Plymouth University has not formed part of any other degree at either Plymouth University or at another establishment.

This study was self-financed, and followed a programme of advanced study which included a successfully completed Res. M. research course, culminating in the RDC2 transfer to Ph. D. process in 2015.

Relevant seminars and conferences were regularly attended at which work was often presented, and exhibitions of the artist's work were visited for consultation purposes.

### Presentation of papers at Conferences:

*Museums of Memory: Narratives of Remembrance in the Arts & Humanities*, Plymouth University, 26 June, 2014

*Reparative Histories: Radical Narratives of 'Race' and Resistance*, University of Brighton, 11-12 September, 2014

*Graffiti Sessions: the Art and Justice of Sociable Cities*, Central St. Martin's, 27 November 2014

### Exhibitions Attended:

*Basquiat: Now's the Time*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, February 2015 and Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, July 2015

*Picasso Mania*, Grand Palais, Paris (exhibition included Basquiat work) October 2015

*Kara Walker: Go to Hell or Atlanta, Whichever Comes First*, Victoria Miro Gallery, London, November 2015

*The EY Exhibition: Wifredo Lam*, Tate Modern, September 2016

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## Introduction

*'I think there are a lot of people who are neglected in art, I don't know if it's who made the paintings or what, but I know black people are never really portrayed realistically, or they're not, they're not even portrayed in modern art at all. Just for a change you know...'*

Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1986 <sup>1</sup>

Amidst Regan's *Great Expansion* and the financial boom of Wall Street, the seven year period between 1982 and 1989 saw the greatest economic expansion noted in global history, as Government policies which initiated this period of intense growth led to a rise in employment, consumer capitalism and overall prosperity. For the *nouveau riche*, works of art provided an investment opportunity, resulting in the development of an increasingly close relationship between art and commerce. As cash poured into the New York art scene, opportunities for young artists were boundless. Prices demanded for the work of popular new artists soared, and artists gained celebrity status, fêted by art dealers and businessmen alike, they were encouraged towards prolific production, flooding the market. National banks offered loans for purchases of works of art and also began accepting these as collateral against investments. Art was big business. It was against this backdrop that twenty-two year old Jean-Michel Basquiat took the art world by storm with his first solo exhibition at Anina Nosei's New York gallery in March, 1982. Basquiat's subsequent rise to fame was meteoric. During his short career he created at least seven hundred paintings, one thousand works on paper and thirty sculptural pieces,<sup>2</sup> and his early work sold for upwards of \$10,000,<sup>3</sup> but by 1988 Jean-Michel Basquiat was dead. Basquiat is largely remembered today as an untrained graffiti artist who, for a short time, rode the wave of commercialisation sweeping over the New York art world before falling victim to drug abuse.<sup>4</sup> However, as I will demonstrate in this thesis, Basquiat made an important contribution to modern art and his paintings are worthy of serious critical evaluation. His work is striking, both for his inspired use of line, colour and composition, and for his use of ingenious iconography. Basquiat's work hits us with a cacophony of signification; signs and symbols creating a codified narrative of the artist's interpretation of ancestry and modernity in relation to the African diaspora and modern urban life. Jean-Michel Basquiat recognised that black people had been '*neglected*', and traditionally '*not portrayed realistically*' in modern art and through his body of work, effected a significant change to that tradition.

Born in 1960 and growing up within a middle class environment in New York, Basquiat showed an aptitude for drawing from an early age, regularly visiting galleries in the city with his mother, who nurtured his artistic talents. Throughout his childhood Basquiat expressed ambitions to become a cartoonist and created illustrated books at home and at school. As a teenager he attended the progressive City-as-School high school, where he developed the SAMO© graffiti with friend Al Diaz, which was to later gain the attention of New York's art elite. However, adversely affected by the breakdown of his parents' marriage and a turbulent family life, Basquiat left school in 1977, a year before he was due to graduate, and did not proceed to further art education. During 1978 he left home and became active around the artistic communities of lower Manhattan, producing and selling hand painted postcards and t-shirts, creating experimental music in *noise* band Gray, and continuing his graffiti writings as SAMO©. This study will examine the work of Basquiat during the period 1978 – 1988, tracing

his movement from graffiti writer to gallery artist, and then examining his substantive work as a painter.

As a largely self-taught artist, Basquiat drew upon the influences of a wide range of established painters, and from diverse cultural references in both music and literature, in order to develop his own unique style, synthesising ideas and information to form 'brilliantly controlled pseudo-gibberish';<sup>5</sup> rich lexicons of codified information offering insight into a wealth of history. Regularly visiting New York's museums and always working with television, music and a range of books and magazines around him, Basquiat drew upon multiple sources to inform his work. His blending of figurative imagery, sign and symbol, referencing of names, dates, historical and multilingual allusions, mix effectively to tell a story of what he termed '*royalty, heroism and the streets*,'<sup>6</sup> commenting upon social issues in a manner that might be described as being a forerunner to contemporary hip-hop culture, where mixing and sampling are combined. Basquiat viewed himself as a visual poet, an artist with a story to tell; a modern day *griot*<sup>7</sup> depicting black history through his expressionist style of painting, blending elements of his multicultural heritage, from icons of Ancient Egypt and West African spirituality, weaving a thread through the Spanish Caribbean islands, and the struggles of the African American in the deep south of America to the urban mix of modern New York. In this unique way, Basquiat challenged the established order of the bourgeois New York art world, and resisted the conceptual binary oppositions inherent within the modernist narrative; divisions between high art and popular culture, the art of the gallery and the art of the street, and whilst seeking access to the hermetically sealed art world, adopted the role of the outsider. Contributing to his purposeful alienation from stereotypical perceptions regarding his identity as an artist,<sup>8</sup> Basquiat blended, from multitudinous sources, fragments, from which he created an image of what might be described sociologically as postmodern multiculturalism. Thus Basquiat's work makes a radical contribution to art history, and provides a commentary on racial politics that is prophetic of future developments in both art and social culture.

Basquiat's refusal to be categorised, both within his life and his work, raises questions concerning the positioning of his painting within an art historical context; is Basquiat's work modernist or postmodernist in style, should we compare his paintings with those of other African American artists, or with those artists whose work he drew stylistic inspiration from? These issues are debated within the current scholarship on Basquiat's work which is comprised largely of essays in exhibition catalogues and journals. Much of this literature relies upon anecdotal and unsupported critique, and is therefore unsuitable for serious discussion within an academic context; much focuses on the personality of the artist, and likewise is unsuitable for consideration within a study focused primarily on Basquiat's work as an artist. However, early exhibition catalogues published to accompany exhibitions in New York at the Whitney Museum in 1993 and at the Brooklyn Museum, where Basquiat was a regular visitor throughout his childhood, in 1995, contain a number of interesting essays which interrogate these questions. Essays by curators and art historians Marc Mayer<sup>9</sup> and Richard Marshall<sup>10</sup> have explored the artist's influences, in order to place his work within a Eurocentric tradition of modern art history. Richard Marshall, curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art between 1975 and 1993, has been a frequent contributor to the discourse surrounding Basquiat's legacy, often focusing upon the artist's influences, in order to place his oeuvre within the tradition of modern art history. Marshall divides Basquiat's work into phases: those paintings made between 1980-'82 which illustrate the artist's life on the streets of New York;

works dense with iconography created between 1982 – '85 reflecting his multicultural and multilingual identity, history and identification with black heroes of popular culture; and finally the paintings made between 1986 and the artist's death in 1988, examining the sources which provided the stimulus for Basquiat's synthesis of artistic sensibilities and socio-political commentary. Marshall argues that Basquiat emerged into the art world at the twilight of modernism, and created from that legacy, paintings which whilst rooted in the figurative, painterly styles of the past, referencing influences from da Vinci to Picasso, were yet both radical and relevant to post-modernist society. I have found Marshall's categorisation useful in my examination of Basquiat's work and his analyses provided a starting point for my early reading. Like Marshall, Mayer, previously director of the Brooklyn Museum, sets Basquiat's work within the context of Western art history, describing Basquiat as being a late modernist; reviving the heritage of modern art whilst creating his own unique style incorporating elements of contemporary American life with an American notion of Africa. This idea of Basquiat's depiction of his heritage being based upon a notion, or perception of an Africa he had no material connection with was one referred to by the artist himself, and one which I explore in greater depth in this study. Whilst Mayer's argument would seem to confuse modernist and postmodernist approaches, both Marshall and Mayer's arguments provide sound starting points for more detailed consideration regarding the location of Basquiat's work.

Broadening the scope of Basquiat's influences art historian Kellie Jones<sup>11</sup> and historian Robert Farris Thompson<sup>12</sup> have focused upon Basquiat's place within the context of American multiculturalism. Jones situates the work of Basquiat within the cultural mix of New York society, with a particular focus upon the artist's heritage and bilingualism; which Jones argues as being key to his ability to distil the best of diverse cultures, truly representing the spirit of the modern age. Jones analyses Basquiat's frequent, if often overlooked, use of Spanish language in his art, redefining the artist, within the wider interpretation of the term 'African American,' provided by Gerardo Mosquera in his study of artist Wifredo Lam,<sup>13</sup> (who I also discuss in comparison to Basquiat) to include peoples and cultures of the Caribbean and S. America, being part of the wider African American Diaspora. Jones' writing has informed my own research and has initiated my deeper investigation into these themes which I judge to be central to relocating Basquiat's work within a broader cultural context.

Jones' arguments are supported by those of Thompson, whose seminal study of the migratory nature of African art and related ritual was a powerful influence on Basquiat's work, particularly the series of griot inspired paintings created from 1984 onwards. Thompson, who interviewed Basquiat several times during his life time, also places Basquiat's work within the context of New York multiculturalism, with a particular focus upon the artist's heritage and use of language, regarding what he also describes as Basquiat's bilingualism as being a key factor in his particular presentation of diverse cultural references. Thompson describes this feature of the artist's work as a form of self-creolisation; a postmodern appropriation and reinterpretation of diverse cultural elements into a single Creole, or multi-ethnic identity. Within this context Thompson argues that Basquiat purposefully creates an 'outsider' or alien identity – a concept which I further examine in chapter 4 in relation to Stuart Hall's studies of identity formation.<sup>14</sup>



Jordana Moore Saggese's recently published text *Reading Basquiat*<sup>15</sup> offers the first, and to date the only, extensive academic study of Basquiat's oeuvre, and as such is an important source of reference. Saggese focuses primarily upon the influence of American jazz musicians and Beat generation writers upon Basquiat's work, providing insightful new discussions which I do not intend replicating in this study. However, my research will further develop Saggese's broader argument that in order to understand Basquiat's work, we must avoid positioning the artist within a historical tradition of either European, American, or African American art, but rather, consider his negotiation of these cultural perspectives simultaneously.

Saggese regards Mayer's description of Basquiat as 'the last modernist',<sup>16</sup> referencing his embracing of historical influences from da Vinci to Twombly, as part of an attempt made during the 1990s to legitimise the artist's work. Basquiat's practice of learning from historical sources is typical of the modernist narrative, wherein the avant-garde moves on from the traditional, but at the same time, in its reaction to a traditional legacy remains connected to a historical unchanging model. The manner in which Basquiat used Western historical influences to inform his analytical depiction of an African American experience both past and present further resonates with Clement Greenberg's definition of modern art, which describes a self-critical engagement with, and interpretation of, modern life in aesthetic form involving both originality and continuity.<sup>17</sup> During the period of Basquiat's career postmodernism was at its peak. Providing a critical and often cynical reaction to modernism, postmodernism is characterised by diversity, and a move away from the single rigid truths of a singular modernist narrative. Whilst Basquiat's work does not depict a postmodern rejection of modernism, or of the canon, some may consider it to be postmodernist, as the artist repeatedly recuperates fragments from previous art and cultural references, (although it is important to note; not always ironically) to create a new visual shorthand; a synthesised mix. This ambiguity will be investigated in my research as I consider Basquiat's contested position within the narrative of art history; examining the way in which his work challenges categorisation, and more specifically, confronts binaries between modernism and postmodernism, moving toward a totally new location. Connected to this I will also consider Basquiat's engagement with the canon, and the way he uses this engagement to confront issues around constructed racial and cultural boundaries.

Saggese questions Basquiat's frequent referencing of (white) European and American artists as influences, and his perceived failure to note the work of the Harlem Renaissance or those African American artists who had gone before him, suggesting that this may have been due to the artist's lack of knowledge or a recognition that comparisons made between his own work and that of renowned white artists held more critical value at the time. This question, which I will consider in depth, demonstrates the ever present dichotomies within Basquiat's work, both in terms of genre and content, together with the ever present issue of race in relation to reception of Basquiat's art. Cultural critic Greg Tate situates Basquiat firmly within an African American arts tradition (a position also upheld by bell hooks, and to a certain extent by Saggese) and argues that it is not possible to discuss Basquiat's art without reference to 'those cornerstones of the American empire, racism and class struggle,' describing Basquiat as being 'a casualty of racism'<sup>18</sup> both in life and death. Whilst Basquiat himself claimed, 'I am not a black artist, I am an artist',<sup>19</sup> recurrent themes of racial and social inequality run deep throughout his art, as do references to his Hispanic Caribbean heritage. My interrogation of Saggese's scholarly extensive study allows me to question and extend further several of the

arguments she makes, creating an opportunity within my own new research to put forward the argument that Basquiat's oeuvre, whilst displaying characteristics of both modernism and postmodernism, is best defined within the context of post-black art.

The term 'post-black' was first used by Thompson in his article Afro-Modernism, in 1991 to describe the limitations of generic terms such as post-modern in describing artistic practice. However, it is artist Glenn Ligon and curator Thelma Golden's 1994 definition that is now commonly used to describe art created by a post-civil rights generation who, whilst remaining informed by historical references, recognised diversity within black experience and identity, and sought freedom to exist without labelling.<sup>20</sup> Ligon and Golden's thinking, set out succinctly by Golden in her 2009 Tate lecture, is central to my study which will demonstrate the way in which Basquiat's work pioneered a post-black aesthetic.

Whilst recently published articles and essays explore other interesting aspects of Basquiat's work; primarily his use of the written word within his art, and his engagement with other artistic forms of practice including music and poetry, as discussed in chapters 1 and 5, offer new insights to analysis of the artist's use of iconography, it is the aforementioned texts which are central to my consideration of Basquiat's positioning within an art historical context. Furthermore, my analysis of Basquiat's art is grounded within a social art history, and it is the work of sociologists Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy that is pivotal in my repositioning of Basquiat, not only within a post-black cultural context, but also within a trans-Atlantic cultural context.

Basquiat's mixed cultural heritage and bilingualism; his ability to converse in both English and Spanish, and present knowledge from dual aspects, redefines his work within the wider definitions of ethnicity outlined by cultural theorist Stuart Hall in his seminal text *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1996.<sup>21</sup> Hall examines Gramsci's non-reductionist interpretation of Marx, offering an important theoretical perspective on existing theories of racism and issues relating to ethnicity. Focusing upon the fragmented nature of social groups within modern society, defined by multiple elements of culture, Hall writing from a British postcolonial perspective, applies his theories to understanding of the diverse African diaspora; issues of complex, continuous identity formation, and considers how these are expressed in the arts. Hall's position provides the background to my own reception and understanding of Basquiat's work, and enables a consideration of the positioning of Basquiat's oeuvre within a global context. Whilst Basquiat refused to be limited by stereotypical labels, in the manner later described by Ligon and Golden as post-black, and drew largely upon the influence of Western art historical references, his work demonstrates an enduring concern with matters of racial politics. Basquiat's concerns are much broader than the time and place he found himself existing within; an essential factor in consideration of the continued relevance of his themes. Considering the legacy of colonialism, Franz Fanon discusses the way in which inner expropriation of cultural identity leads to 'individuals without an anchor; without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless – a race of angels.'<sup>22</sup> Fanon's description might be applied to Basquiat; not merely one of the last modernists or postmodernist, but rather a proponent of a new artistic sensibility; of multicultural, transnational, globalised history and culture, synthesising diverse information delivered via the television, comics and popular music, whilst simultaneously delving into the archives of the past to recover and regenerate forgotten histories; creating a narrative of cultural *mestizaje*<sup>23</sup> within art.

Throughout the course of my study I will engage with the issues of cultural memory and identity as a formative process, referencing Hall's <sup>24</sup> writing within the field of cultural studies to support my analysis of Basquiat's work in relation to the nature of cultural memory and diasporic identity. In particular, I will examine the model of diaspora theory developed by sociologist Paul Gilroy which builds directly upon the work of Hall. Charting the Middle Passage of the African diaspora across the Atlantic Ocean, Gilroy describes the Atlantic as being *a continent in negative* which links a network of cultures from Africa, America, the Caribbean and Europe. Gilroy argues that the diaspora is made up of diverse cultures, albeit with a shared original history, and proposes the concept of the Black Atlantic as a counter-culture to European (or indeed American) modernity, defining a multiplicity of modernisms, rather than one single narrative, and thereby recognising a 'transnational and intercultural perspective.'<sup>25</sup> For Gilroy, the journeys of the Middle Passage, generally regarded in terms of the negative aspects of enforced dislocation, are regarded as an opportunity for expressive cultural exchange. Gilroy's theory develops Du Bois' earlier model of 'double consciousness,' which described the split subjectivity of African Americans, who identified both within and outside of the dominant culture of the United States. Gilroy's model, offering a paradigm of a diverse African diaspora, will inform my own presentation of the cultural context to Basquiat's multi-lingual and multi-referential work, linking with my reading of Hall who presents a complex model of class and ethnic groupings within society. This position is further substantiated by reference to other British writers including Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, whose 1988 essay 'De Margin and De Centre' <sup>26</sup> develops Hall's theory of cultural identity and 'Otherness,' and Okwui Enwezor whose critique of the work of Chris Ofili, supports my comparison between the work of Basquiat and Ofili.<sup>27</sup>

Engaging with Gilroy's approach, and building upon the work of these other writers who examine issues of cultural identification outside of the United States, my research will reframe Basquiat's oeuvre within the context of the Black Atlantic, thus broadening the scope of scholarly response to the artist's work, which at present remains situated largely within the context of American art historical research. The use of Gilroy's theory provides a more nuanced assessment of Basquiat's paintings as, by repositioning Basquiat in relation to Gilroy's multiplicity of modernisms I will demonstrate that theories of diaspora provide methodologies for interpretation of the artist's work which highlight issues concerning postcolonial legacies, cultural identification and anti-racisms, later articulated within a post-black aesthetic, that challenges a traditional narrative of art history.

Much of the extant critique of Basquiat's work concerns his use of iconography, a trace of his early graffiti writing, and this enduring reference to graffiti has often adversely influenced reception of the artist's work. For example, in their extensive chronological study of modern art history, *art since 1900* (2004) Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh and Joselit mention Basquiat dismissively in the course of discussing the impact of postcolonial art's search for a third way between archaism and assimilation; 'others involved, say, in graffiti art like Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988) had played with signs of hybridity.'<sup>28</sup> In Chapter 1 I will examine Basquiat's purposeful engagement with graffiti, under the pseudonym SAMO© during the period 1978 - 1980 as he sought to gain recognition in the art world, followed by his swift severance of links with graffiti as he moved from street to gallery. Supporting Saggese's challenging of persistent references to Basquiat as a graffiti artist, which she argues to be stereotypical, reducing him to 'just another untrained, non-white artist,' and contributing to his work being 'grossly underestimated,'<sup>29</sup> my research will demonstrate the way in which Basquiat, who always regarded himself as a painter, used the commercial colonisation of the

graffiti scene to his own advantage and then went on to represent elements of urban existence within his early paintings. I will also consider more recent scholarship focused on Basquiat's poetic writing which redefines analysis of the SAMO© graffiti. I will base my analysis of Basquiat's SAMO© graffiti upon scrutiny of photographic evidence gathered by photographer Henry Flint during 1979,<sup>30</sup> together with interviews with Basquiat and documentary film footage of the New York graffiti scene of the same period.<sup>31</sup> Engaging with Marx's theory of specificity I will examine the commodification of graffiti art in New York during this period, considering the racialised nature of graffiti (defining racialisation as the ascribing of ethnic or racial identity to this particular artistic practice). I will examine the way in which the institutionalised racism inherent within responses to graffiti art, served to stereotype Basquiat and diminish his contribution to the history of painting. In order to demonstrate the way in which Basquiat drew upon his study of the work of established artists in order to develop his own unique style of painting, I will examine a number of paintings created by Basquiat during 1981 in his first studio in New York, establishing the primary focus of my research on analysis of Basquiat's work as a painter.

In Chapter 2 I will examine Basquiat's narrative of the African diaspora and analyse the contribution his work offers to the field of reparative histories, defined here as a consideration of those particular historical representations, which appeal for recognition and redress in the present. Drawing upon the methodologies of Hall and Gilroy, as outlined above, I will discuss the way in which Basquiat's paintings created during the period 1983 – 1984, such as *The Nile (El Gran Espectaculo)*, 1983 provide a representation of transatlantic slavery, colonialism and postcolonial identities, considering the way in which the artist articulates, through these constructions, arguments against racial injustice. My analysis of Basquiat's work will question the role of artistic representation in reconstructing contested pasts, and demonstrate the way in which the narrative within Basquiat's early work builds upon the legacy of those African American artists who preceded him: Romare Bearden (1911 – 1988), Aaron Douglas (1899 – 1979) and Jacob Lawrence (1917 – 2000), whilst simultaneously demonstrating the artist's exploratory application of the technical elements within European modern art, as he worked to establish his own unique style.

This theme will be further developed within Chapter 3 as I focus upon Basquiat's series of talismanic griot paintings created between 1984 – 1988 analysing the way in which Basquiat adopted the role of the *griot*, or storyteller, as he researched his own heritage, and simultaneously invoked the spiritual qualities associated with this mythical emblem. Basquiat is known to have read Robert Farris Thompson's book *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1984) upon publication, and this seminal diaspora study, a precursor to Hall's later work, which traces the migration of the Yoruba people and their culture to America and the Caribbean islands sparked an interest in West African mysticism, which is reflected within Basquiat's work. Basquiat described himself as, 'an artist who has been influenced by his New York environment,'<sup>32</sup> and his references to his Haitian and Puerto Rican heritage came largely from his own research. However, he drew from his reading of Thompson the concept of *cultural memory*; that is the notion of a shared, collective memory described in the early diaspora studies of scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois. Thompson's work, focusing upon the influence of African art and associated spiritual belief systems on the culture of the Americas and Caribbean, originates a theory of self-creolisation, later to be developed by Hall. The term creolisation is defined by Thompson as 'closely identified with hybridity... the

appropriation and reinterpretation of non-native cultural elements into a single Creole, or multi-ethnic society'.<sup>33</sup> Thompson later applied this process of self-creolisation to describe Basquiat's purposeful creation of an identity which might be considered alien to those within the parameters of the formal white dominated world of modern art, but which demonstrates a sense of belonging within a larger globalised society of multi-ethnicity. My examination of Basquiat's engagement with the process of self-creolisation will draw upon Hall's development of this concept and its role in identity formation, which Hall describes as a matter of *becoming* as much as *being*, belonging as much to the future as to the past. Rather than being something which already exists, eternally fixed within some essentialised historical past, Hall regards cultural identity as a notion which undergoes constant transformation, subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power. For Hall, far from being grounded in mere recovery of the past, waiting to be found, and capable of securing for individuals a sense of self, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves, within narratives of the past.<sup>34</sup> Hall's theories which are rooted in British multiculturalism, provide a more nuanced construct for consideration of Basquiat's art, and as previously noted, enable me to view the artist's work through a broader, more diverse lens than that engaged in earlier, largely American based scholarship.

My research demonstrates the manner in which Basquiat's exploration of the mysticism within Yoruba culture, and the paintings created during this period, mark a point of separation in both content and style from his work and that of other African American artists who preceded him, and with contemporary artists such as Kara Walker, whose work reconstructs a narrative of the transatlantic slave trade and its legacy upon the lives of African Americans, which is rooted in an American experience. In contrast, Basquiat's work at this time illustrates clearly Thompson's model of self-creolisation, as the artist mixes elements of historic and modern culture from *all sides* of the Atlantic. Within this chapter I will draw comparisons between Basquiat's work and that of Cuban painter Wifredo Lam (1902 – 1982), innovative in blending Western modernism with symbolic elements of African and South American diasporic culture. Although Basquiat never cited Lam as an influence, there are similarities in the painting and the artistic intentions expressed by both artists during their lifetimes. Gerardo Mosquera's scholarship on Lam, which I will examine, demonstrates the diversity of the African diaspora, and the flexible, transformational quality of that culture over time, as outlined by Gilroy, taking into account the development of Hispanic and South American traditions, and will allow me to consider further the potency of Basquiat's inclusion of Spanish language within his work.<sup>35</sup> I will argue that, as Basquiat explored the mysticism of Yoruba culture, and the reframing of this within Caribbean spiritual practices, his painting acquired an increasingly subtle depth of meaning, as he blended signifiers of cultural practice characteristic of diasporic migration. Within both chapters 3 and 4, I will demonstrate the way in which Basquiat's work might be viewed in relation to an African, African-American, Caribbean or European tradition, whilst interrogating and extending further, Saggese's argument that it would be wrong, and indeed racist, to position his work solely within any one of these traditions, as this would disregard the wider influences Basquiat drew upon and referenced.

In Chapter 4, focusing upon the self-portraits painted by Basquiat during his lifetime, I will consider the resonance of Basquiat's influence upon a post-black aesthetic, looking in particular at the work of contemporary British artist, Chris Ofili (born 1968). Writing on the subject of Ofili's *Within Reach* exhibit at the 50<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, curator Okwui Enwezor

describes the way in which Ofili's work *dismantles* and *remakes* imperial British memory, so as to 'shift its horizon... towards the line of transnational African and diasporic imagination' within the context of a canonical Western modernism, that has 'made the presence of black subjectivity anathema to modern conceptions of identity' through colonisation and colonial representation, to the extent that, 'within the entire canon of Western representation (the black subject) emerges (forever) as the lugubrious Caliban.'<sup>36</sup>

In his critique of Ofili's paintings, which place the black figure at the focal point of the narrative, Enwezor argues that through this 'reinvention of the black subject, literally and historically, on its own terms within the tradition of painting' Ofili is thus, 'situating blackness within the canon of European art.'<sup>37</sup> I will argue that we observe this re-invention, or repositioning of the black subject, outside of the stereotypical boundaries of imperial memory within Basquiat's earlier work, which Ofili cites as being influential to his practice, and within this chapter I will consider the relevance of Enwezor's argument in relation to Basquiat. Writing in 1983, at the peak of postmodernism, T.J. Clark argued for the need to move away from the modernist canon, with its historical, and Clark claims *random* exclusions and inclusions of the work of certain artists, and for this to be 'replaced by other more intricate, more particular orders and relations' which would result in the development of new kinds of value judgements, with certain works of art coming to be regarded as more important, others less so, as the grounds of valuation shift.<sup>38</sup> Whilst upholding Clark's argument, I will argue that historical exclusions of the work of black artists from the canon has not been random, but purposeful. In consideration of this point, I will examine the rationale behind Enwezor's recuperation of the canon in relation to Ofili's work.

Basquiat considered black people to be *neglected*, not *portrayed realistically*, or *at all* in the history of modern art, and the content of his oeuvre suggests that he purposefully set out to address this issue. (His comments made in 1986, cast doubt upon his awareness of the work of those artists originating out of the Harlem Renaissance, and as noted earlier, this question will be debated within Chapter 2). I will argue that, by repeatedly painting himself (and those heroes of popular African American popular culture he so admired) into his work, Basquiat demonstrates the role of artistic representation in reconstructing contested pasts. For whilst the black subject is often omitted from the historical tradition of art, or misrepresented as a subservient figure, Basquiat's self-portraits all depict the artist in positions of power; from *Dos Cabezas*, 1982 in which Basquiat, still an emerging artist, positions himself on equal terms with his mentor Andy Warhol, to *Self-Portrait*, 1986 where the artist depicts himself at work: an upright figure crowned with a halo of dreadlocks, arms outstretched with paintbrush in hand. Unlike Ofili, who portrays the black subject ironically, often confronting the viewer with racist stereotypes, Basquiat depicts the black subject heroically, whether he is painting his sporting or musical heroes, or himself. My study of Basquiat's engagement with the mystical icon of the griot or gri gri, set out in Chapter 3, will be applied in this chapter to my analysis of the artist's use of self-portraiture as an expression of power, furthering my argument that Basquiat identified himself with the griot.

I will contrast my analysis of Basquiat's self portraits with visual representations of the artist created during his lifetime by his peers, including Warhol's portraits of Basquiat and Schnabel's highly inaccurate 'biopic.'<sup>39</sup> Engaging Golden's consideration of the fetishisation of the black male figure within visual culture, I will examine the enduring impact of this representation upon reception of Basquiat's art. My study will demonstrate the way in which Basquiat's self

portraits not only position the artist within the narrative of art history, but also serve to challenge the manner in which he was depicted by others, within both art and the media, during his lifetime and following his death.

The conclusion of my study will focus upon analysis of three of Basquiat's paintings created during the final year of the artist's life, including *Eroica II*, *Riding with Death* and *Exu*. The paintings show the culmination of the artist's development over the ten year period of his career, and his move towards a more simplistic form, which illustrates his sophisticated use of colour and composition. In the series of paintings, *Eroica I & II*, 1988 we see the iconography and juxtaposition between writing and drawing, reading and seeing in the artist's technique, the stylistic influence of Twombly together with Basquiat's appropriation of literary references, blended in a subtly codified representation of modern drug culture. In my analysis of these paintings I will expand upon the reference made by Sagesse (2014) to Derrida's writings on *sous rature*; the nature of erasure, demonstrating the way in which Basquiat's ambiguous use of language allowed him to express his own sense of subjectivity in relation to issues of social and racial politics.<sup>40</sup> My analysis of the second painting, *Riding with Death*, 1988 which is based upon da Vinci's drawing *Allegory of Envy*, 1483-85, will examine in depth previously discussed characteristics evident within Basquiat's oeuvre; his engagement with European art historical sources, his situation of the black subject within the canon, and his blending of ancestry and modernity, focusing in particular on Basquiat's extensive study of the work of Da Vinci, represented within the artist's notebooks and drawings. My analysis of the final painting *Exu*, 1988 will discuss the way in which Basquiat engages with emblems of mysticism and spirituality, aligning himself with Exu the trickster, at the crossroads between life and death; symbolic of his defying of categorisation as he negotiates his positioning within art and within society.

The title of this study, *Gold Griot: Jean-Michel Basquiat Telling (His) Story in Art*, highlights the pivotal nature of both the griot inspired paintings and the icon of the griot to my research. It alludes to the way in which, throughout my thesis I demonstrate the way in which Basquiat the artist operates, through the medium of his paintings, as a visual storyteller,<sup>41</sup> his work engaging historical narratives, specifically those of colonialism and associated racism, and exploring the ways in which these narratives have frequently been distorted over time in order to perpetuate inequality and stereotypical attitudes within society. Basquiat's expressive, figurative paintings, loaded with codified iconography, draw upon multiple historic and contemporary sources in order to articulate the artist's particular 'story,' or narrative of black history. Basquiat's paintings are constructions of both past and present which, as my study shows, also allow the artist to create evolving identities in the manner described by Stuart Hall,<sup>42</sup> identities at times influenced by the Otherness associated with the icon of the griot as talismanic avatar. However, whilst acknowledging postmodernisms recognition of the fractured nature of cultural memory, I have previously observed that Basquiat's work should not be viewed within a postmodern framework, (throughout this study I set out a clear argument against categorising Basquiat as a postmodernist painter) and therefore I avoid digression into discussions concerning postmodern narrative theory, instead maintaining a foundation for my thesis within Gilroy's Black Atlantic.

In his structuring of the Black Atlantic model, Gilroy describes the importance of the tradition of musical and oral storytelling within black Atlantic cultures, in both maintaining a shared (imagined) historical past and enclosing the plurality of black cultures across the Western

hemisphere. This tradition of storytelling is discussed at length in my thesis which examines the role of the griot as oral storyteller in African culture, and the perpetuation of this tradition through the bluesmen of the American South. Gilroy examines the role of the musician within this context, (a theme also explored by Basquiat) and argues that through the performance of storytelling, 'a relationship of identity' is enacted collaboratively between the musician, or storyteller, and the audience. Gilroy observes that 'stories are told, both with and without music,' and I argue that Basquiat be regarded a visual storyteller, perpetuating and developing further, the cultural dynamic of sharing histories in ways other than through use of the written word. Basquiat's narratives arise out of a historic ritual based around ancient African and Biblical legends, tales of slavery and escape from bondage, in which Black signification<sup>43</sup> provides a subtle challenge to dominant constructs of established racism.

For Gilroy, storytelling contributes to an alternative public sphere in which 'particular styles of autobiographical self-dramatisation and public self-construction (are) formed and circulated as an integral component of insubordinate racial counterculture.' He argues that the traditional stories of 'the triumphs of the weak over the strong that dominated black cultural production during the nineteenth century gave way eventually to a different kind of story altogether... contextualized in the emergence of a more significant counter power in the medium of black popular culture.'<sup>44</sup> It is within this context that Basquiat operates, complicating the legacy of the griot, whilst creating a new autobiographical self-construction - a unique history - in short creating his story, in a visual lexicon that contributes powerfully to a modern insubordinate counterculture; for whilst Basquiat's paintings might hang in the galleries and private collections of the rich and powerful, the content of his work commemorates the struggles of the oppressed. My thesis therefore demonstrates the way in which Basquiat the painter, acts as a visual storyteller, articulating a particular narrative of black history in the way described by Gilroy. Furthermore, my study examines the ways in which, through his engagement with the icon of the talismanic griot, Basquiat creates a challenging, subversive element within his compositions. In this way Basquiat adopts the dualistic qualities of the 'gold griot,' telling (his) story, on his terms, in art.

My research will show how, as a black artist painting in the 1980s, Basquiat might be regarded as standing at a crossroads, surrounded by clashing cultures as in major cities across the western world; traces of a colonial past remained a source of conflict. As Thompson points out, for some, this breaking down of a mainstream, dominant culture into multiplicity, created fear, for others, including Basquiat, it provided 'the greatest linguistic and cultural opportunity in history.'<sup>45</sup> Basquiat's aesthetic, drawing upon multiple histories insists upon the recognition of diversity and difference. However, rather than creating what Thompson optimistically describes as a move towards a universal nation of utopian multiculturalism devoid of difference, Basquiat reminds us of Gilroy's argument that, in a 'postcolonial twilight to encounter difference produces jeopardy'.<sup>46</sup> Basquiat's work continues to confront that jeopardy in his representation of social inequality, racisms and heroism.



## Chapter 1

### SAMO© - Graffiti, commodification and the politics of racialisation

*'My work has nothing to do with graffiti. It's painting, it always has been. I've always painted. Well before painting was in fashion.'*

Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1988 <sup>1</sup>

Whilst Jean-Michel Basquiat was not a graffiti artist, he is often perceived as such on account of his early association with graffiti during the period 1977 – 1979 when, as a struggling young artist, he gained the attention of the New York avant-garde through his cryptic writings as SAMO©. In this chapter I will examine Basquiat's emergence as an artist, within the context of the early 1980s New York art scene, at a time when street art came to the attention of the formal art establishment. I will address the implications of Basquiat's association with graffiti upon the reception of his work, arguing that the racialised nature of graffiti during this period had a negative impact upon critique of the artist's painting. As I trace Basquiat's move from street to gallery I will discuss the way in which his early works serve to problematise the division between high and low art; retaining elements of the street, in both content and composition, whilst illustrating the influence of art historical sources in style and technique, demonstrating Basquiat's assertion that his work be recognised as painting, and not graffiti.

#### SAMO©

During the spring of 1978, the artistic community inhabiting the Lower East Side of New York became intrigued by the appearance of a wave of graffiti writing; plain capitalised text inscribed in black spray paint or marker pen, under the tag SAMO©.<sup>2</sup> Many of the texts criticised the lucrative elitism of the established art world citing for example;

'SAMO© AS AN ALTERNATIVE 2 'PLAYING ART WITH THE 'RADICAL? CHIC' SECT ON DADDY'\$ FUNDS 4.U'  
&  
'SAMO© FOR THE SO-CALLED AVANT-GARDE.'(PI.1&2)

What intrigued the inhabitants of SoHo and Tribeca about the SAMO© graffiti was that it was unlike the majority of street art prolific in New York at the time, and not just in terms of its location.<sup>3</sup> The term *street art*, first used during the 1970s, described an underground sub-culture of artistic practice, existing outside of the established art world, characterised not only by graffiti, but also by language, music and fashion which originated in New York at this time. Graffiti in New York appeared most commonly on subway trains and uptown, in the ghettoised Bronx area of the city, being largely created by marginalised, working class, black and Hispanic youth, who painted in crews. Often with several hundred members, these crews operated in defined areas of the city, painting specific trains, and working in clearly defined styles. Writers operated within hierarchical divisions of labour, from the 'king' who designed the piece, to the 'toy' whose job was filling in outlined shapes with blocks of colour. Being a crew member was a respected role and members worked to move up the hierarchical structure over time as their skills developed. The practice of graffiti operated around highly structured subcultural groups

which offered a sense of community and cohesion to disenfranchised youth. Street art of the period took the form of highly stylised tags and complex, illustrative imagery, known as *Wild Style*,<sup>4</sup> developed by graffiti artist Michael Tracey (aka *Tracey168*) founder member of the Wild Style crew (Pl.3). The 1982 movie *Wild Style*<sup>5</sup> positively depicts the emerging hip hop culture of the 1980s; a blend of graffiti, rap music and break dancing, and features a number of young graffiti artists of the time, including Lee Quiñones (aka *Zorro*) Sandra Fabara (aka *Lady Pink*) and Fred Braithwaite (aka *Fab 5 Freddy*), who were all to gain renown for their work in this field.

For the *Wild Style* inspired crews, to whom the private space of the gallery was largely inaccessible, due to the constraints of financial, racial and class boundaries, the urban environment offered an arena for artistic expression. However, Basquiat was not part of this subterranean movement and the SAMO© writings bear no relation to street art of the period in either style or practice. Whilst still a student at the progressive City-as-School high school for gifted children in Manhattan, Basquiat created the fictional comic strip character SAMO (an acronym for Same Old Shit) the purveyor of an alternative religion, challenging what he termed 'mediocre art'<sup>6</sup> and consumer capitalism. During 1977, his final year in school, Basquiat and friend Al Diaz began spraying SAMO© poetic aphorisms around the Manhattan district. The SAMO© graffiti was conceptual rather than illustrative; slogans were intended to attract the attention of the very people critiqued, the 'so called avant garde,' and did just that. By December 1978, both the SoHo Weekly News and the VOICE newspaper invited SAMO© to make contact and reveal his identity. Basquiat was quick to respond to media interest, appearing a number of times on cult cable access television show, Glenn O'Brien's *TV Party* discussing his intentions and writings as Mr. SAMO©.<sup>7</sup> Basquiat and Diaz parted company shortly after this, and for a time the epitaph SAMO© IS DEAD appeared in the streets of lower Manhattan. Speaking at a later date about SAMO© Diaz stated, 'Jean-Michel saw SAMO as a vehicle, the graffiti was an advertisement for himself'<sup>8</sup> and Basquiat himself described it as a means of 'attacking the art gallery circuit'<sup>9</sup> demonstrating that this was his intended audience.

During this period, having recently left his family home and dropped out of high school, Basquiat was involved in various artistic endeavours. Although not intrinsically linked to the highly organised world of underground street art, through his involvement with the New York club scene, Basquiat befriended graffiti artists Fab Five Freddie and Ramellzee. However, Basquiat's interactions with these artists were focused upon his involvement in film and music; later in 1982 produced and designed the cover for a record by Ramellzee and K-Rob entitled *Beat-Bop*.<sup>12</sup> In 1979 he formed the band *Gray*, an experimental art-house project which provided opportunities for Basquiat to explore musical improvisations and recite his poetry (discussed further in Chapter 5). During 1981 he featured, playing a loosely autobiographical role, in the *New Wave*<sup>10</sup> movie *Downtown 81*<sup>11</sup> In this film Basquiat is seen moving around the city, carrying both a saxophone and several canvases, spraying SAMO© graffiti onto walls and interacting with musicians and artists well known at the time. Despite these explorations of various artistic forms, which enabled him to perform an artistic identity; a preview of the role he was aspiring to, Basquiat's ambitions lay in painting, and throughout this period he created, and sold on the street, numerous drawings, paintings, hand painted t-shirts and postcards.

Several examples from a series of postcards originally sold by Basquiat for between one and three dollars each are currently held in private collections (Pl.4). The postcards are each constructed from collaged materials including Xeroxed images, photographs of the artist taken

in photo booths and found materials, and are inscribed with markings and splashes of coloured ink. These postcards show clearly the early influence of the work of Robert Rauschenberg (1925 – 2008) on Basquiat's emerging artistic practice – a theme discussed at length later in this chapter. The series is entitled '*Anti-Product*,' hinting at Basquiat's later concerns with the impact of consumer capitalism on society, and perhaps an interest in the work of Andy Warhol (1928-1987) and several of the cards feature deconstructed images of the sporting heroes which were also to become a recurring theme within his body of work. Basquiat is known to have tried to sell postcards of this type to critic and curator Henry Geldzahler in a restaurant around this time. Later, in conversation with Geldzahler he recalled, 'I was selling these postcards and somebody told me that you had just gone into this restaurant. It took me about fifteen minutes to get up the nerve to go in there. I went in and you said, 'Too young.' And I left.'<sup>13</sup>

### **New Art, New Money**

By June 1980 Basquiat's work was included in the *Times Square Show*, and in February 1981 fifteen works (drawings and small paintings) were exhibited in the *New York/New Wave* exhibition curated by Diego Cortez, which presented the work of up and coming new artists, closely aligned to the *New Wave* music scene. These pieces attracted the attention of a number of visitors to the show including Henry Geldzahler, art dealer Bruno Bischofberger (both of whom were to become significant in Basquiat's career) and Italian gallery owner Emilio Mazzoli. In May of the same year, Basquiat travelled to Italy for his first solo exhibition, organised by Mazzoli in Modena. Although at this point Basquiat was still using the pseudonym SAMO© the works exhibited in these early exhibitions have more in common with the style of Twombly than *Wild Style*. Reviewing the *New York/New Wave* exhibition in the December 1981 issue of *Artforum* magazine, poet and journalist, René Ricard, focused in particular upon the work of Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, both peripheral figures in the graffiti world. Ricard highly applauded Basquiat's work, noting the 'political acuity' with which he used written form, collating diverse materials in order to make a point, and famously stating that, 'If Cy Twombly and Jean Dubuffet had a baby ... it would be Jean-Michel (whose paintings display) the elegance of Twombly and the 'brut' of Dubuffet.'<sup>14</sup> The impact of this article was to raise Basquiat's profile, significantly marking the beginning of his critical acclaim, and securing his move from street to gallery.

In what New York Times critic Grace Glueck described as 'the art world's relentless search for new amusements and investments,'<sup>15</sup> graffiti, a form of creative expression once regarded as subversive, became the property of the mainstream, owned and sold for capital gain in the financially driven art world of the early 1980s, as dealers enticed graffiti artists into the gallery. In defining the place of works of art within Western capitalist society, it is important to recognise the role of market forces in both the creation and the reception of that work, whether it exists in the street or in the gallery. As Marx explains, production and consumption exist both in relation and in opposition to each other, the mediating movement between the two meaning that a product only truly comes into existence through the act of consumption. Furthermore, as consumption creates the need and motive for production, together with the object produced, production also gives consumption specificity. Referring directly to works of art, Marx writes, 'The object of art – like every other product – creates a public which is sensitive to art and enjoys beauty.'<sup>16</sup> This concept is an important one, and bears closer examination. The *specificity* of the object produced denotes the object as being, not merely an

object in general, but a *specific* object, which must be consumed in a *specific* manner, mediated by the production itself. In this way, production not only supplies the material for the need, but the need for *specific* materials. In relation to works of art, as with other *specific* products, the means of production creates a public sensitive to the aesthetic of art, creating not only an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object. Within the canon of Western art history, the *specific* nature of works of art relate to the *Grand Narrative*, the notion of art being created by gifted individuals and enjoyed by those with the knowledge and insight to understand the inclination and intentions of the artist, within the exclusive environment of the gallery or museum.<sup>17</sup> This exclusive means of production, and the high value placed upon works of art, leads to a highly *specific* mode of consumption, as art is exchanged for vast amounts of capital, exhibited and appreciated therefore, by a limited elite section of society, which Marx describes as the superstructure, those controlling both the economic base of production, and forms of social relations in society; the legal and political systems, and ideology, from which springs the very notion of artistic expression.

Within the highly commercialised art world of the 1980s Marx's rules of *specificity* increased so that art became promoted and marketed through the sophisticated channels of the media, understood by an *uber-cool* intelligentsia, and purchased by the newly termed *mega-rich*. Both art and artists represented marketable commodities. The established art world, at the apex of the market economy, attempted to colonise that art created outside of the formal tradition of art history, and gallery owners and art dealers, laid claim to street art, enticing the most respected street artists to produce, for a time, sanitised versions of their work on canvas, so that this art created outside the boundaries of *specific* consumption was briefly absorbed into the art market. Most street artists enjoyed short periods of success within the gallery circuit, before returning to the realm of the street, and despite this period of interest, street art remains viewed generally, as *low art* – less worthy of critical acclaim than art created within the echelons of the formal art establishment. Basquiat successfully deployed this temporary colonisation of street art; his tenuous links with the graffiti scene contributing to his initial success as a marketable commodity. However this association with graffiti was to have enduring effects upon the reception of his work, as critics labelled him a street artist and considered his work, therefore, unworthy of serious consideration. Saggese describes the 'implicit racism' of this stereotyping and argues that Basquiat's beginnings as SAMO© 'fed into the mythology of the untrained African American naive artist.'<sup>18</sup> This view reflects that held by Basquiat himself, who during his lifetime claimed that his work had *nothing to do with graffiti*, but had always been focused on painting, revealing his awareness of the implications of this stereotyping on his work. Interviewed at the Fun Gallery by Marc H. Miller in 1983 Basquiat responded to questions about his graffiti days saying, 'I used to have those with some friends from high school, and some other kids, you know, we used to just drink down town ale all the time and, you know, write stuff on the walls... just teenage stuff... there was no ambition in to at all.' Asked specifically if he could recall what he wrote as SAMO© Basquiat replied, 'It was just the stuff from a young mind.'<sup>19</sup> Whilst recent scholarship focused on Basquiat's notebooks has attributed greater significance to Basquiat's early graffiti, and it might be suggested that the artist played down his connections to street art, understanding the negative implications this had upon acceptance of him as a 'serious' artist, it is important to the integrity of scholarship to acknowledge statements made by the artist during his life as being true and accurate descriptions of his intentions.

Marx's theory of the superstructure, operating as a means of repression in relation to social class, is further developed by Gramsci who describes the way in which the influence of the superstructure is sustained via cultural practices, and reversely, how subservient classes might use artistic means in order to challenge the established order.<sup>20</sup> More recently, Hall<sup>21</sup> re-examines Gramsci's interpretation of Marx in light of the massive growth in the cultural industries which shape mass consciousness. Rather than adopting a simplistic view of Marxist ideology, Hall leans towards an understanding of Marxism which sets parameters, within which diverse social relations exist. Hall describes the non-homogenous character of the class subject, which leads to the fragmented nature of social classes, and multiplicity of groups within each economically delineated class. These diverse groups are defined by elements of culture which may offer resources for transformation, and as individuals have the capacity to form alliances within and across boundaries, make up the complex terrain within which struggles for equality are acted out. Hall's interpretation is useful in defining the social conditions which provided the context for the emergence of the 1970s New York street art or *Subway movement*, and in explaining the racialised nature of graffiti at this time. Defining *racialisation* as the ascribing of ethnic or racial identity to a particular practice, in this case the practice of graffiti, it is clear that the work of the New York Subway movement, the vanguard of modern graffiti and hip-hop culture, being created predominantly by African American and Hispanic artists, has contributed to graffiti being commonly considered the art of the black community. Historically, modern urban graffiti has developed as an expression of challenge to inequality within varied contexts, not always necessarily related to ethnicity (for example, in the tradition of anarchist graffiti in Barcelona). However, in New York at this time, race was a significant factor in both the production and reception of street art. Describing the city as 'a production of separation,'<sup>22</sup> Guy Debord, critical theorist central to the Situationist movement refers, not only to Marx's separation of the worker from the object of production as the mechanism of distribution commences, but also the separation, or alienation of those in society who have little stake in the production of capital. It has always been in areas of urban deprivation, and from amongst those disenfranchised by capitalist society, that modern Western graffiti has emerged, responding to the spectacle of capitalism with a counter activity; an expression of creativity that stands outside of the dominant system of production and consumption. In this way, for the graffiti artist, the city provides the stimulus for artistic expression, and the cityscape the canvas, allowing reclamation of the urban space and its codes, in effect, overturning the standards that, in capitalism, uphold artistic creation; the character and ownership of works of art.<sup>23</sup>

### **Graffiti racialised as 'black'**

The fragmented nature of society within New York during the 1970s, gave rise to the clearly racialised Subway movement, where graffiti was regarded a means of transformation, and the street the terrain to act out the struggle for equality. Within the context of Regan's presidency; unsympathetic to the civil rights of minorities and focused upon economic expansionism, New York graffiti art was seen as a *problem* to be dealt with by Mayor Giuliani's office. Sociologist Dick Hebdige describes the way in which New York graffiti was described at the time by British artist Michael Craig Martin as 'visual intimidation,' 'the impulse of the jungle' and by American writer Norman Mailer, as 'monkey scratches on the wall.' Hebdige suggests that,

'Basquiat, unlike Haring or Scharf, (fellow artists who had links to street art) was compelled, on the strength of his skin colour, to shed the graffiti connection in order to

find acceptance 'above ground' though invasion anxieties on the part of white taste-makers, dealers etc. continued to impede Basquiat's reception as a 'serious' i.e. marketable artist.'<sup>24</sup>

Adding to this argument, Sagesse claims that labelling Basquiat a street artist, defined him as 'just another untrained, nonwhite artist' and limited scholarship on his work to a primitivist model.<sup>25</sup> Making this claim, Saggese is referencing the earlier work of other African American and Caribbean artists, such as Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and Wifredo Lam, who despite their significant contributions to American art, are not generally acclaimed within modern art history. Clearly Basquiat's early association with street art resulted in negative reception to his work. The racialised nature of graffiti in New York during this period, and moreover, the institutionalised racism inherent within responses to graffiti art, served to stereotype Basquiat and reduce his work to what critic Robert Hughes described in his epitaph to the artist as, 'a touch of the 'primitive.'<sup>26</sup>

The need to clarify Basquiat's position as a painter, which highlights the historical distinction between so-called *high* and *low* art, whereby graffiti is generally deemed a low art form, arises not out of a denigration of graffiti as an art form, but rather in order to rightly recognise the contribution Basquiat's body of work makes to the history of painting. It is possible to position the SAMO© graffiti within the context of Debord's Situationism; the writings intended to confront consumer capitalism and shock the bourgeoisie, providing a *dérive*, or recoding of the urban space. Recent exhibition of Basquiat's notebooks at the Brooklyn Museum, New York have led to renewed interest in the artist's early graffiti writing, viewed alongside the contents of the previously unpublished notebooks; a collection of lists, short passages of narrative text, isolated phrases or single words. Curator Dieter Buchhart argues that Basquiat's 'conceptual literary graffiti' is not only 'central to understanding his notebooks, drawings, paintings, assemblages, and sculptures but also illustrates his conceptual way of working.'<sup>27</sup> This reading of Basquiat's work with an emphasis on written word leads Buchhart to claim that, 'Basquiat's art can thus be located in the field of concrete poetry.'<sup>28</sup> Much has been written on the subject of language within Basquiat's work, and this new angle of critique which views language as the artist's 'most constant medium,'<sup>28</sup> offers an interesting new dimension to existing scholarship.

Basquiat's substantive work however, was not in the medium of graffiti - more accurately, his oeuvre might be considered a hybrid of European historical avant-gardes and urban American culture expressed primarily within his paintings. As Basquiat sought recognition and acceptance as a painter in the traditional sense, amongst the exclusive elite of the art establishment, he effectively deployed the art world's fascination with street art, as a means to achieving that goal, later explaining to art dealer Henry Geldzahler in 1983, 'I wanted to build up a name for myself.'<sup>30</sup> In his scathing account of what he regards the racist response to Basquiat's work, critic Greg Tate describes Basquiat's conception of making a name for himself as far transcending the aspirations of graffiti writers; 'Making it to him meant going down in history, ranked beside the Great White Fathers of Western painting in the eyes of the major critics, museum curators and art historians.'<sup>31</sup> So, as he became established within the framed space of the gallery Basquiat swiftly lost the SAMO© tag and began to sign paintings in his own name, although the narrative within his work remained the narrative of urban existence. Basquiat's paintings retain a wealth of inscription; signs and symbols referencing the language, music and culture of urban life, telling the story of racial and class struggle, of what he

described as 'royalty, heroism and the streets.'<sup>32</sup> In this way, Basquiat's early association with graffiti and the negative impact of this upon reception of his work highlights the problematic interaction between the public space of the street and the private space of display within the gallery, in relation to the *specific* consumption of art. In retaining the narrative of the street within his composition, Basquiat's work challenges the boundaries between these public and private spaces.

### Twombly and Rauschenberg

Basquiat's earliest works on paper, produced during 1981 reflect the transience of urban existence; aeroplanes, trains, boats and cars feature repeatedly in his drawings. In *Untitled/Car Crash*, 1981 (Pl. 5) Basquiat alludes to his personal memory of being hit by a car, whilst playing in the street outside his home as a seven year old child. Working in acrylic and oil stick on rough brown burlap, frayed at the edges and mounted loosely onto reclaimed wooden supports, Basquiat literally incorporates the reclaimed materials of the street into his art. Within a rectangular frame, marked in crimson oilstick, we observe in the foreground a vivid green car, its front wheel a bloody red, prominent as it collides with a milk truck. The force of the collision is emphasised by track marks in the foreground, and the dynamic tangle of black line, suggesting the child caught beneath the cars. The scene takes place beneath the brightly lit window of a building. Within the negative space in the uppermost section of the painting, in a style reminiscent of Cy Twombly (1928 – 2011) Basquiat has listed the words ORRO, PASSPORT and KATALYST, the final word is underlined, the tail of the letter Y forming a directional marker, downwards to the image of the car. Whilst at first glance appearing somewhat crude in its execution, this early work holds deeper meaning. Here we see the influences which shaped the artist's aspirations, from Rauschenberg's incorporation of reclaimed materials to Twombly's use of calligraphy, (Twombly was in fact the only artist Basquiat ever cited as an influence) together with the biographical subject matter and inclusion of codified information which would become characteristic of Basquiat's own style. In Spanish, Basquiat's mother tongue, the word *orro* is translated as *gold*. As a result of the accident illustrated in this work, the young Jean-Michel suffered serious injuries and spent a month in hospital. During this time, his mother gave him a copy of the book *Gray's Anatomy*, which inspired his earliest anatomical drawings and later, the name of his first musical band. In this painting Basquiat interprets the incident as the catalyst which was to prove his passport to success.

As a child Basquiat had demonstrated an early interest in art, creating drawings and cartoons from a young age. The artist's father recalled the way his mother Matilde who was herself artistically talented encouraged him; 'she got him started and she pushed him.'<sup>33</sup> Matilde frequently drew with her son and from the age of five, regularly took him to galleries and museums in New York; including The Brooklyn Museum, The Whitney Museum of Modern Art and The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Throughout his lifetime Basquiat remained a regular visitor to these establishments, and was later to say, 'my mother gave me all the primary things. The art came from her'<sup>34</sup> Certainly, Basquiat's education in art came from his extensive reading, and study of the art contained within the museums that surrounded him. Twombly's work was frequently exhibited at the Leo Castelli Gallery, Manhattan, during the 1960s and 1970s, and was the subject of a retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in 1979, so it is likely that Basquiat had frequent opportunities to view Twombly's drawings growing up; as he told Geldzahler, 'My favourite Twombly is *Apollo and the Artist*, with the big 'Apollo' written

across it.’<sup>35</sup> Certainly, Twombly’s influence is plain to see within Basquiat’s *Untitled/Car Crash*, 1981 in terms of the movement between writing and drawing. In Twombly’s *Apollo*, 1975 (Pl. 5), we observe the iconographic style developed by Basquiat; the thin slanting line of the inscription, and inclusion of lists which create visual patterns of allusions. The critic Brooks Adams<sup>36</sup> claims that Twombly’s 1979 exhibition at MOMA was influential to the work of several artists who found success during the 1980s, including Basquiat, and it is interesting to note that before Basquiat, Twombly’s work had been the subject of what art historian Harald Szeemann refers to as ‘a disproportionate amount of critical attention (being described as) childish scrawls and pissoir graffiti.’<sup>37</sup> Artist and writer Louis Armand compares the effect of the common negation of Twombly as being ‘equivalent to the treatment of Basquiat... in much of the critique surrounding his work in the ‘80s... reduced to being a ‘graffiti artist’.’<sup>38</sup> Clearly, there exist a number of similarities between the work of Twombly and Basquiat. Twombly’s works on paper, often alluding to themes taken from classical Mediterranean culture, incorporates into painting the style of ancient graffiti characteristic of the classical period, linking the past with the present. Similarly Basquiat, whose early works such as *Untitled/Car Crash* reflect the influence of Twombly’s style, was to frequently juxtapose elements of the ancient and the modern throughout his oeuvre.

Basquiat’s early works demonstrate this juxtaposition clearly; his narrative focuses upon the inequalities within modern urban life, whilst his painterly style speaks of his referral to art historical influences, and it is these historical references which further separate his work from street art of this period. *Per Capita*, 1981 (Pl.7) provides an example of Basquiat’s early work on canvas, a blend of text and image, presenting historical information and contemporary commentary. Against a roughly sketched cityscape, the painting depicts a black, male boxer in Everlast shorts. Above his head is a halo, a symbol frequently used by Basquiat to denote the heroic status and martyrdom, or exploitation, of the black male role models from the worlds of music and sport which feature in many of his paintings. The boxer holds aloft a flaming torch, an emblem of victory, and a reference to the Olympian ideal of equality. Above him are inscribed the Latin words ‘E PLURIBUS’ and ‘PER CAPITA.’ The phrase, *E pluribus unum*, meaning, ‘out of one many,’ is taken from the currency of the United States, referring to the historical unification of the thirteen original colonies of the United States. Below this phrase, Basquiat begins an alphabetical list of states within the union, and the per capita income of citizens in those states. In his analysis of the painting, Fred Hoffman<sup>39</sup> suggests that this listing serves to illustrate the unequal distribution of wealth between for example; ‘ALABAMA \$7.484’ and ‘CALIFORNIA \$10.856,’ recognising Alabama as a poor Southern state, home to a sizable black population, repressed by racism and inequality, and California as an affluent, white, middle class state. Whilst this comparison might not remain accurate today, I support Hoffman’s interpretation of the significance of Basquiat’s historical comparison; characteristic of the artist’s enduring concern with the dichotomies of wealth and poverty, equality and inequality in society.

Further example of these themes are evident in *Crowns (Peso Neto)*, 1981 (Pl.8) and the later work, *The Death of Michael Stewart*, 1983 (Pl.9) within which Basquiat champions the graffiti artist, creating works of temporal artistic expression that question the notion of art tied up with capitalism as a marketable commodity. The painting depicts the violent attack by white police officers, which is believed to have caused the death of twenty-five year old graffiti artist Stewart, following his arrest for allegedly tagging a New York subway train. Basquiat knew of



Stewart, and biographical accounts suggest that he was horrified by his death. In this painting we observe the artist's characteristic inclusion of Spanish language to signify heartfelt meaning; the headline ¿DEFACEMENT©? accompanied with Basquiat's visual references to graffiti tags signify the common perception of graffiti as defacing public property, whilst the Spanish term *defacimento* means 'undoing,' an individual's ruin or downfall. With characteristic deployment of codified meaning, Basquiat makes an oblique connection between the act of graffiti and the demise of Stewart. The question marks cause the viewer of the work to interrogate the narrative and may refer to the questionable investigation of Stewart's death and the acquittal of the officers charged. The copyright symbol denotes this as being Basquiat's personal comment. This powerful and evocative painting shows clearly the enduring trace of the artist's early writings as SAMO© demonstrating his purposeful recuperation of elements of modern urban life into his art, as a means of challenging the division between high and low art, and confronting racism.

During 1981, after seeing Basquiat's work in the *New York/New Wave* exhibition, Annina Nosei became the initial dealer in Basquiat's work, and provided the artist with both funds to purchase materials, and his first studio in the basement of her New York gallery at 100, Prince Street, SoHo. Born in Italy, Nosei studied in Rome before teaching at both the University of Michigan and UCLA, becoming involved in the art market during the late 1960s and opening her New York gallery in 1979. The gallerist had a reputable background and represented artists including Francesco Clemente, David Salle and Julian Schnabel. In interview Nosei explained that she had 'always been interested in art with an activist aspect... the expression of clear ideas, and where the background of the artist is evident; emotional and cultural and in a way, political.'<sup>40</sup> She described Basquiat's early work as being 'closer to the meaning and the authenticity of expression (and therefore) superior to the majority of art at the time,'<sup>41</sup> and her support was significant in establishing Basquiat's position as a painter.

However, Basquiat's working in the basement studio of Nosei's gallery attracted a degree of negative attention, with critic Jeffrey Deitch commenting in his review of Basquiat's 1982 exhibition in the gallery, 'Basquiat is likened to the wild boy raised by wolves, corralled into Annina's basement and given nice clean canvases to work on instead of anonymous walls. A child of the streets gawked at by the intelligentsia.'<sup>42</sup> Deitch's comments allude to Nosei's organised strategy for marketing Basquiat's work;

'I was putting together major sales to important collectors who were buying, for example, the Germans. I told them that they should have a work by Jean Michel Basquiat also, for \$1,000 or \$1,500 more on the bill of \$25,000 they had already run up. This worked quite well: these collectors gained an early commitment, told their friends, and all of a sudden Basquiat's paintings were found in collections beside more well-known artists, as the youngest of all.'<sup>43</sup>

The rapid pace of sales of his work eventually led to Basquiat deciding to sever his working relationship with Nosei in May 1982 complaining 'I wanted to be a star, not a gallery mascot.'<sup>44</sup> However, Basquiat was quick to challenge racist assertions depicting him as a naive primitive exploited by Nosei. Interviewed by Marc Miller in 1982, the artist was asked to comment on 'the story that you're being locked in a basement and ordered to paint.' Basquiat responded, 'That has a nasty edge to it. I was never locked anywhere. Oh Christ. If I was white, they would just call it an artist in residence, rather than saying that stuff.'<sup>45</sup>

The studio in Nosei's gallery provided Basquiat with his first dedicated space in which to paint, and marks a transition point in his career. In her largely anecdotal account of Basquiat's life, Phoebe Hoban<sup>46</sup> details the artist's structured daily working practice during this time, as recalled by gallery assistants; arriving at midday with croissants from nearby deli *Dean and DeLuca*, and painting until late at night, often working on several canvases simultaneously to the sounds of Ravel's *Bolero*. Hoban also describes tensions caused by the close working proximity between artist and dealer, and the frantic sales of Basquiat's work, claiming that paintings were frequently sold before Basquiat considered them finished. Certainly Basquiat produced numerous drawings and paintings during this time, works which show his rapidly developing style, from the early drawings and paintings made on found objects to impressive canvases which demonstrate sophistication honed from his knowledge of art history. These paintings demonstrate the way in which Basquiat learned to draw and paint, in the classical tradition, by studying the work of great artists. His work does not merely mimic his influences, as from his study he developed a visual lexicon, with which to synthesise a diverse range of elements forming his own unique style. Hofmann describes Basquiat's first works created within a studio context as being indicative 'of a newfound power and emerging identity' as the artist pursued specific strategies and devices; 'exploring the integration of image and text (discovering) more complex and elaborate means of 'layering' the distinct planes of illusionistic space created by form, color and line, and the atmospheric effects into a unified composition.'<sup>47</sup>

One such example of Basquiat's 'power' as a painter is the complex and evocative *Untitled*, 1981 (Pl.10). Over a canvas collaged with a collection of scripts, pages torn from notebooks, the artist has layered acrylic of a violent, bloody crimson, his brushstrokes thick, strong and dynamic, creating a frenzy of horizontal and diagonal bars which encapsulate a red space in the right foreground. Within this space is the focal point of the painting, the ashen head and shoulders of a man. His features, drawn in black are ghastly and anguished; his face distorted into a grimace of agony, one eye socket empty, the other eye glancing fearfully over his shoulder, his mouth open in a fearful grin. The figure is crowned by a halo of spiked thorns, marked out with the graffiti writer's aerosol spray, lines of which dance in a frenzied tangle over the centre of the painting, reaching upwards to the top right hand corner. The work is passionate and violent both in the artist's use of colour and technique – his handprints just visible within the paint bearing witness to his toil over the canvas. Closer inspection of the work bears clues as to the potential identity of the tragic figure portrayed, as Basquiat's closely written collaged notes reveal lists relating to antiquity. Basquiat references the Old Testament, alluding to the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel, witnessed by Hezekiah, king of Judah and the sacking of Rome, lamenting in Spanish for the one hundred hearts assassinated:

2 CIEN  
3 CORAZONES  
CIENTO CORAZONES MARZO  
CIENTO CORAZONES ASSASSINATED AT

Further inscription refers to battles fought during the rise of the Roman Empire:

CAESAR WHO IN  
HIGHEST EXCELLENCE  
VERSUS PHILIP  
DEFEAT ANTONY

The painting demonstrates Basquiat's influences, drawing from Rauschenberg's use of colour and texture, particularly Rauschenberg's *Untitled*, 1954 (Pl. 11) a collaged piece of similar value and intensity. Rauschenberg's work, combining elements of painting and sculpture in a style essentially American, informed Basquiat's technique, and like Rauschenberg, Basquiat draws his own life into his art, although his references are more diverse, mixing cultural elements of modern America with remnants of an African Caribbean past. In *Untitled*, 1981 Basquiat takes the technique of collage further, as he literally layers historical references; partially obscuring the written trace of ancient battles with paint, and completing the composition with the aerosol squiggle of the modern New York street artist. Unsurprisingly, Eli and Edythe Broad, collectors of Rauschenberg's *Combines* were quick to notice Basquiat as early as 1981, and began collecting his work from this point.

### **The devices of painting**

A further example of Basquiat's prodigious development as a painter during his time in Anina Nosei's studio is the widely acclaimed and unprecedented *Untitled (Head)* 1981 (Pl.12). In contrast with many of his paintings, which were quickly executed, Basquiat worked on this painting over the course of the year. Originally sold in 1981 for \$4,000, the work was resold to the Broad Foundation in 1982 at Christie's for \$19,000, a remarkable amount for the work of the twenty-two year old artist, and as M. Franklin Sirmans notes, 'all the more noteworthy for an artist of color.'<sup>48</sup> The Broad Foundation describe the way in which the work 'demonstrates Basquiat's consummate and complex abilities as a painter,' claiming that;

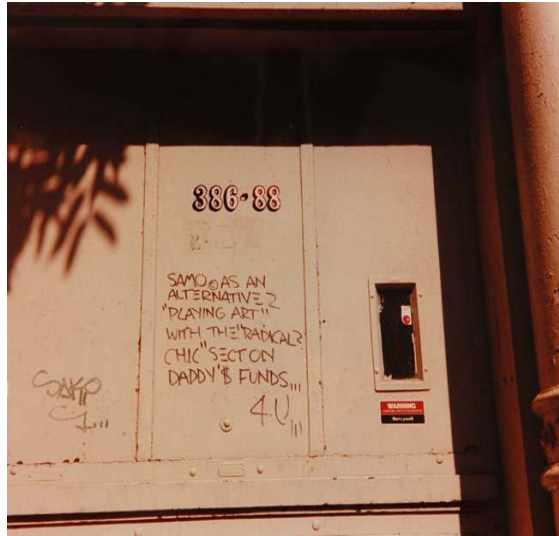
'Contrary to many observers of his life who, with veiled racism, considered him a primitive, "wild child" talent, Basquiat's endeavours were informed by a long-standing and sophisticated interest in the devices of painting.'<sup>49</sup>

Certainly, the complexity of this work illustrate Basquiat's abilities as an artist, informed by his knowledge and understanding of art. Painted in acrylic and oilstick on canvas, the central element of the work is a large head. The negative space surrounding this is painted in soft, warm hues of cerulean blue and pyrrole orange, blended with red. The tones are muted; the paint applied lightly, the brushwork smooth and flat. In the upper left-hand section of the painting, against a layer of chalky white, a fine undecipherable inscription is marked in black, and this is balanced by further black lettering in the bottom right of the foreground; the ambiguity of these inscriptions causing the viewer to look closely, questioning their meaning. In contrast to the warm tones of the negative space, the head of an African male, which dominates the composition, is outlined in black oilstick, the detail within the form created through a subtle blending of intense colour; shades of brown, black and blue, orange and gold. The detailed use of line, which delineates the features and texture of the skull, is intricate and controlled, as oilstick is layered over paint and in turn engraved with a fine mesh of delicate drawn and scratched markings, creating an effect of scarring – this is the worn and tattered head of a slave, or warrior. The hair is shorn, standing up from the skull in short bristles, the eyes downcast and sorrowful, outlined in red. The skin on the side of the skull and the jaw is removed, revealing broken teeth and the inner mechanism of the mind, juxtaposing external physicality with the inner, psychological level of existence. The work is intensely emotive, vivid and powerful; expressing the oscillation between strength and suffering, life and death.

In March 1982 Basquiat's first solo exhibition in New York at the Anina Nosei Gallery was a great success, his time in Nosei's studio allowing him to make the transition from street to gallery artist. Later in the same year solo exhibitions of his work were shown at Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles, Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich and he became the youngest artist to participate in the *dokumenta 7* international exhibition in Germany, his work shown alongside that of established artists such as Twombly. In his review of Basquiat's first New York show curator Jeffrey Deitch wrote;

'Basquiat's great strength is his ability to merge his absorption of imagery from the streets, the newspapers, and the TV with the spiritualism of his Haitian heritage, injecting both into a marvellously intuitive understanding of the language of modern painting.'<sup>50</sup>

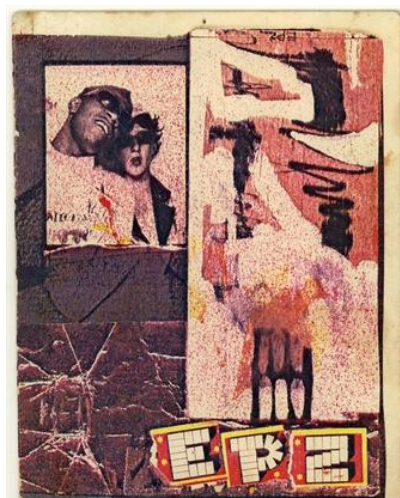
Whilst agreeing with Deitch's comment I would assert that Basquiat's understanding of painting was never intuitive, or naive, but rather based upon his extensive study of the work of established artists and lifelong dedication to drawing. His engagement with American modernism is clearly evident in his early works. Saggese quite rightly points out that it would be wrong to read Basquiat's oeuvre solely within the limited frame of Western modernism, (as she claims previous scholars such as Marshall and Mayer have done in an attempt to legitimise his work) referencing bel hooks' assertion that 'even when Basquiat can be placed stylistically within the exclusive white, male art club that denies entry to most black artists, his subject matter – his content- always separates him.'<sup>51</sup> However, the influence of the modernist tradition in developing Basquiat's complex abilities as a painter cannot be denied. Analyses of Basquiat's early works created during 1980 – 1982 within this chapter, illustrate what he learned from studying the work of essentially American artists such as Twombly and Rauschenberg. Basquiat described himself as 'an artist who has been influenced by his New York environment',<sup>52</sup> and his early paintings truly reflect that environment in both style and content. Unlike street artists of the period, Basquiat positioned himself within the framed space of the gallery, aspiring to a place within the history of art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and whilst he may have been incorrectly identified as a street artist during his lifetime, recent scholarship recognises the broader value of his work, and ensures him that place. In the following chapters I will examine the way in which Basquiat engages with, and moves beyond the single narrative of Western modernity, introducing into his work an *intercultural perspective*, and thus contributing to Gilroy's *multiplicity of modernisms*.



Pl. 1 & 2 SAMO graffiti photographed by Flynt, H. 'The SAMO graffiti photographed by Henry Flynt' [Online] <http://www.henryflynt.org/overviews/samo.htm> [4th April 2014]

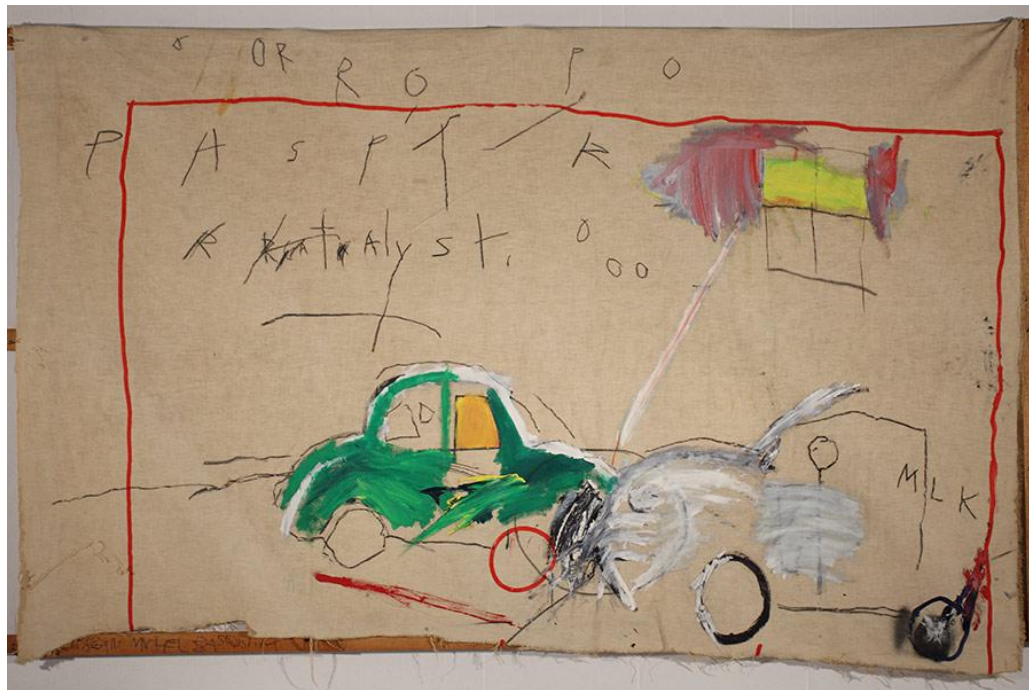


Pl.3 Noc 167, *Style Wars*, 1981, whole car, New York City subway.  
Photo: Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art: Street Graphics/Street Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2009

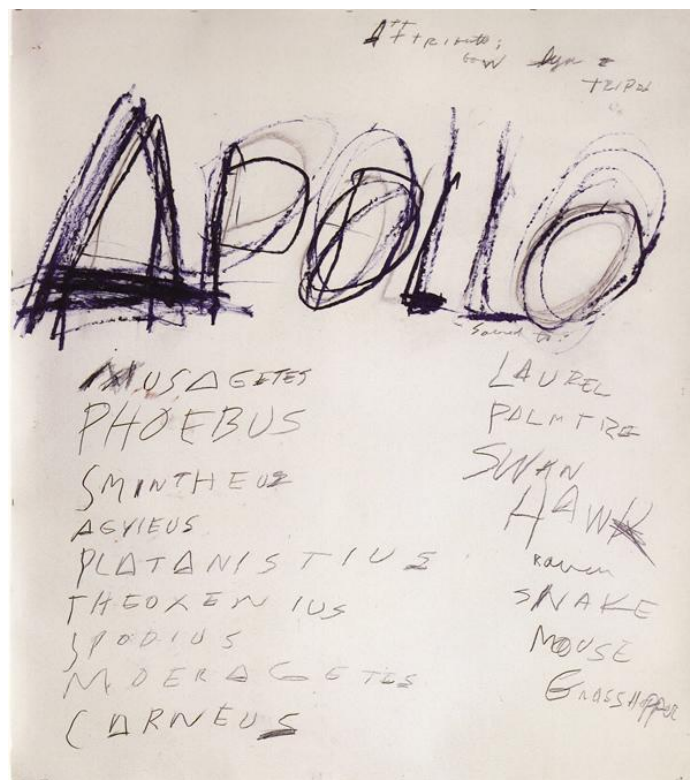


Pl.4 Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Anti-Product* postcard, 1980  
Xerographic print and collage mounted on paper, 14 x 10.08cm. Private collection





**Pl. 5** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled (Car Crash)* 1981  
Acrylic & oilstick on burlap mounted on wooden supports  
109 x 180.5 cm. Private collection



**Pl. 6** Cy Twombly, *Apollo*, 1975  
Oil paint, wax crayon, collage and pencil on  
paper, 142 x 128 cm. Private collection



**Pl. 7** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Per Capita*, 1981  
Acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas, 203 x 381cm.  
The Peter Brandt Foundation.



**Pl. 8** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Crowns (Peso Neto)* 1981  
Acrylic, oil paintstick and paper collage on canvas,  
182.9 x 238.8 cm. Private collection





**Pl. 9** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *The Death of Michael Stewart*, 1983  
Acrylic and ink on wallboard panel, 63.5 x 77.5 cm.  
Private collection



**Pl. 10** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled (Caesar)*, 1981  
Acrylic, oil stick, paper collage and spray paint on canvas  
245.5 x 182.9 cm. The Broad Art Foundation



**Pl. 11** Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled*, 1954  
Oil, fabric and newspaper on canvas, 179.7 x 119.6cm.  
The Broad Art Foundation





**Pl. 12** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled (Skull)*, 1981  
Acrylic & oilstick on canvas, 205.7 x 175.9cm.  
The Broad Art Foundation

## Chapter 2

### Reparative Histories – Basquiat's narrative of diaspora

*'I wanted to copy the whole history down, but it was too tedious so I just stuck to the cast of characters.'*

Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1983<sup>1</sup>

Over the course of 1982 Basquiat continued to work at a feverish pace in the studio on Crosby Street, and later, from August 1983, in a larger studio leased from Andy Warhol at 57, Great Jones Street, New York. His work was now regularly exhibited in Europe and the USA, in both solo and group exhibitions (Appendix 2). In March 1983 two Basquiat paintings, *Untitled (Skull)* 1982 (discussed in Chapter 1) and *The Dutch Settlers*, 1983 were included in the Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, along with the work of Basquiat's contemporaries; Keith Haring, Barbara Kruger, David Salle and Cindy Sherman. Basquiat's characteristic technique; the integration of word and image, and the layering of collaged material and line, form and colour, together with his emphasis upon figurative composition, were now securely established within his work. His aesthetic synthesising elements from a range of sources; through his composition, he addressed critical issues of racial inequality both past and present. Basquiat's work from 1982 shows the artist's growing interest in African American history, and his visual representation of the African diaspora has been debated by critics and scholars of his work due to the commonly perceived paradox between Basquiat's stylistic groundings in a (white) Western art tradition and focus on black history within his subject matter. Within this chapter, as I consider Basquiat's early depictions of diaspora, and the role of the work of art in relation to discussion surrounding reparative histories, I will examine this area of debate. I will argue against a dualistic understanding of the artist's work, replacing this with a more nuanced, differentiated perspective based upon Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* theory.

#### The debate concerning the paradox of style versus content

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Basquiat learned largely from studying the work of artists whose work he admired, such as Twombly and Rauschenberg, in museums and in books, and it is these artists who were the major influences upon his style of painting. Discussing the way in which Basquiat built upon these influences Thompson notes, 'another thing that marked his genius, he never copied, he always improvised a total revision' and refers to Basquiat demanding that 'If you want to talk about influence... influence is someone's idea going through my new mind.'<sup>2</sup> Basquiat's referencing of exclusively white, Western art historical influences, including Da Vinci, Picasso and Kline, as well as Twombly and Rauschenberg, has been considered problematic by several black American critics and scholars of his work, on account of the perceived binary opposition between the focus of the artist's subject matter and the positioning of his work within a broad, Western art historical context. In her 2014 monograph on Basquiat, Saggese acknowledges Basquiat's engagement with Western art history, but argues that;

‘To read Basquiat’s work solely within this limited frame... is a mistake. Despite all attempts to look at his work within the existing frames of art history – modernism, expressionism ... these paintings resist such clean categorisation and remain inscrutable... while he may be stylistically ‘European’ his subject matter is not.’<sup>3</sup>

In support of her tenet Saggese refers to hooks’ assertion that ‘even when Basquiat can be placed stylistically in the exclusive white male art club that denies entry to most black artists, his subject matter - his content... always separate(s) him.’<sup>4</sup> In response to this issue, Saggese outlines her aim to ‘reframe the protocols Basquiat employed as a working artist and reconsider his grossly underestimated contribution to the history of American art.’<sup>5</sup>

Whilst Saggese’s work makes an important contribution to extant scholarship on Basquiat, and clearly articulates the need to resituate Basquiat’s oeuvre beyond limiting categorisations, this argument is problematic on several levels. Firstly, it supposes a distinct separatism within Western art history between European and American art: Saggese claims that it is a mistake to read Basquiat’s work within the *limiting framework* of Western art history, whilst simultaneously planning a reconsideration of Basquiat’s contribution to American art history. The argument both positions American artists Twombly and Rauschenberg (influential to the work of Basquiat) within a stylistically European Western modernism, whilst distinguishing an American art history. From the outset of modernism, the work of artists on both sides of the Atlantic has been closely inter-related, intellectually and in terms of both style and composition, so that whilst European and American art traditions have developed throughout modernism, perpetuating a distinction between these historical traditions in relation to contemporary discussion is divisive in this context. Critiquing writers such as Marshall and Mayer, who previously positioned Basquiat’s work within what Saggese describes, a ‘predominantly white art history,’<sup>6</sup> Saggese suggests that Basquiat’s engagement with the canon might have constituted a means of finding acceptance, but that ‘the search for the artist’s Eurocentric origins has... precluded a discussion of his place within an African American tradition’ and like hook, claims that despite his style Basquiat’s work ‘never quite converges with the European canon of art history’<sup>7</sup> as he ‘always remains explicitly a black artist, always an outsider.’<sup>8</sup>

Claiming that the subject matter of Basquiat’s paintings alienates his work from the broad tradition of Western modern art history, this argument fails to recognise the breadth of individual experience articulated throughout modern art practice, and in effect, confines Basquiat’s work within an exclusive African American experience. Whilst Saggese rightly points out that there would be ‘racist connotations in reading Basquiat solely within a Eurocentric canon,’<sup>9</sup> which historically excluded the contribution of black artists, her argument is based upon constructions of racially defined categories within art history, and thus, also has racist implications. Saggese describes how Basquiat at no time cited any African American artist as being influential to his work, ‘choosing instead to comment on... artists like ‘Twombly, Rauschenberg, Warhol, Johns,’ maintaining ‘critical silences’ on the work of those African American artists who preceded him, and that during a 1987 interview, Basquiat ‘failed to correct’ an interviewer who described him as ‘the only black man to have become a very successful artist.’<sup>10</sup> She points out that in 1983 two of Basquiat’s paintings were included in the group exhibition *50 Years of Afro-American Art*, at the Center Gallery of Bucknell University, Pennsylvania, alongside the works of artists including Jacob Lawrence and Romare

Bearden, and that Lawrence was the subject of a large retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum, a favourite haunt of Basquiat's, in 1987.<sup>11</sup> One can sense Saggese's frustration in the judgemental language of her comments concerning Basquiat's artistic preferences, and this is also made evident during a panel discussion when she explains;

'He's always citing white artists, like always, it's like De Kooning and Pollock and Picasso... and it's never a black artist... what's up? Why is he never fighting for ... Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, all these other artists? ...I think it's because... he was actually called the black Picasso during his lifetime in the press and I think it was because he was so isolated... There was no one who had that kind of success, who was African American at that time.'<sup>12</sup>

These comments confuse Saggese's argument as they fail to recognise the previously noted acclaim of Jacob Lawrence during Basquiat's lifetime. Her argument also suggests an expectation that the individual artist possesses a moral obligation to represent and fight for others of the same racial heritage, indicating a focus on the persona of the artist, rather than on the work they create. This issue is addressed by Kobena Mercer in his essay *Black Art and the Burden of Representation*.<sup>13</sup> Discussing the negative critical response to the Hayward Gallery's 1989 exhibition *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, Mercer notes that much of this criticism focused, not on the works of art included in the exhibition, but on the sociological nature of the content of the work, and a general expectation that the art included would be representative of *all* black art in Britain. Thus, the exhibition 'was burdened with the role of making present that which had been rendered absent in the official versions of modernist art history.'<sup>14</sup> Mercer's argument that this expectation; that the work of an individual artist should be representative of an entire racial group, is reductionist in that it ignores the aesthetic qualities of their work is one which I apply to consideration of Basquiat. Questioning Basquiat's frequent referencing of (white) European and American artists as influences, Saggese suggests that his perceived *failure* to note the work of artists of the Harlem Renaissance, or those African American artists who had gone before him, may have been due to the artist's lack of knowledge, or more probably a recognition that comparisons made between his own work and that of renowned white artists held more critical value at the time. Henry Geldzahler raised this query with Basquiat during an interview in 1982:

GELDZAHLER: What was your idea of art as a kid? Did you go to the Brooklyn Museum?

BASQUIAT: Yeah, my mother took me around a lot.

GELDZAHLER: Did you have any idea what Harlem Art was?

BASQUIAT: No, I wanted to be a cartoonist when I was young.<sup>15</sup>

Basquiat's response to Geldzahler indicates a genuine lack of awareness regarding the art of the Harlem Renaissance, (and in the interests of scholarship, statements made by the artist during his lifetime must be considered honest and accurate, where there exists no valid reason to dismiss them - even when those statements do not support the preferred opinions of scholars of the artist's work). Basquiat's lack of awareness was further supported by his father, Gérard Basquiat. Responding to suggestions that the frequent inclusion of the capitalised letter A in several of Basquiat's early works, such as *Cadillac Moon*, 1981, may have referred to the artist Aaron Douglas, Gérard Basquiat replied,

'I think the multiple As that populate Jean-Michel's early work refer to Hank Aaron, the baseball player – for the spelling, and because there are so many baseball references in his work. At the time, Hank Aaron was a major, major player and he was on the verge of breaking the Babe Ruth record. He was a very fascinating player, and Jean-Michel totally understood that. I can't think of any other Aaron, even his friends, who he could've been referring to.' <sup>16</sup>

Later in 1982 Basquiat was photographed by James Van Der Zee, renowned for his work capturing life during the Harlem Renaissance. The photographs commissioned accompanied Geldzhaler's interview published in *Interview* magazine, January 1983 (Appendix 1 Fig.3). Basquiat admired Van Der Zee, and painted the photographer's portrait, *VNDRZ*, during the same year. Through their interaction, Basquiat would undoubtedly have learned something of the artists of the Harlem Renaissance. However, as Basquiat's knowledge of art history was acquired largely in the museums of his native New York, it is reasonable to suppose that this is also where his preferences were formed; preferences which reflected the collections of the city museums. Basquiat had grown up in a middle-class family in a multi-cultural Brooklyn neighbourhood. His father mixed in a diverse social circle, and Basquiat's step-mother, Nora Fitzpatrick was a white British woman. In 1980s postmodern New York, amidst a globalised abandonment of the notion of collective identity in favour of the cult of individualism, Basquiat himself belonged to an ethnically diverse group, both professionally and socially. As Basquiat frequently challenged racist attitudes, we can assume that he would certainly have based his artistic preferences on the *work* of other artists, rather than their ethnicity. Basquiat most admired the work of Twombly, Da Vinci, Picasso, Kline and Rauschenberg, and developed his own practice as an artist within the tradition of these artists, as illustrated in the comparisons made by Marshall.

Saggese outlines her intention to retrospectively relocate Basquiat's work in order to avoid limiting categorisations, but as noted, her arguments are contradictory. Acknowledging the 'connections between Basquiat and other European or American artists,' <sup>17</sup> but claiming that reading the artist's work within this context tells 'only part of the story,' Saggese recognises that Basquiat used the references he appropriated to 'shape an innovative language of painting that corresponded to his own contemporary experience,' <sup>18</sup> citing artist and writer David C. Driskell who argues against an art history which classifies artists according to race, claiming instead that all artists, regardless of ethnic origin, represent their own unique interpretation of the context in which they live. Driskell's argument provides an appropriate context for consideration of Basquiat's work, free from limiting categorisations, and Saggese further references art historians Darby English and Jacqueline Francis who further uphold Driskell's position, <sup>19</sup> concluding to apply this line of thinking in order to reposition Basquiat's place within a revised *black arts* tradition. This conclusion in itself seems to be at odds with Driskell's argument, and serves to perpetuate the lingering debate concerning the positioning of Basquiat's work within either a tradition of black arts, or within the broader tradition of all modern art.

I argue that Basquiat's multilingual and multi-referential work defies the limiting categorisation implied by Saggese's argument, which only goes part way in resituating Basquiat, and stress the importance of accepting as accurate, statements made by the artist in regard of his working practice. As previously observed, during his lifetime Basquiat challenged attempts to

categorise his work in this manner stating, 'I am not a black artist, I am an artist.'<sup>20</sup> Basquiat's combining of diverse influences, sources and styles; African, European and American, in his articulation of the African diaspora, position his work within a broad, trans-national perspective of modernism, as proposed in Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, which recognises a counter-culture to European modernism, a thesis which argues;

'against essentialist versions of racial identity and racial nationalisms, in favour of a shared, through heterogeneous, culture that joins diverse communities in North and South America, the Caribbean, Europe and Africa.'<sup>21</sup>

This transnational and intercultural paradigm recognises specific developments unique to each culture, but sees these as being part of an overall *rhizome*, or network. In order to accept this revised perspective, it is important to understand the contested nature of the positioning of the work of black artists within modernism. This is relevant, not only to discussion concerning Basquiat's place within an art historical context, but also to understanding of the way in which Basquiat's work exists in relation to Western modernism; in some ways comparable with the art of the Harlem Renaissance and those black artists who preceded him, yet equally comparable to the work of white Western artists on both sides of the Atlantic, and intrinsically moving beyond any one essentialist narrative of Western modernity.

### **Modernism and the appropriation of the primitive**

Central then to the debate concerning Basquiat's place within modern art history, lies the historic exclusion of black art forms from art history's Grand Narrative, and the appropriation of so called 'primitive' art forms by early European modernists. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century 'primitivism' emerged in Paris amongst an avant-garde seeking a renewal of European society and culture. Generally regarded as the founder of the Primitive movement Paul Gauguin (1839 – 1906) was one of a number of artists who 'sought to challenge European conventions that they felt to be repressive,' and 'imagined the primitive as an exotic world where style and self might be refashioned dramatically.'<sup>22</sup> Gauguin famously abandoned his bourgeois life in Paris in favour of what he believed to be, the uncivilised idyll of the French colonial island of Tahiti, whilst other modernists such as Pablo Picasso (1881 – 1973) looked to Africa for inspiration. In their definition of the term 'primitive,' historians Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton note that although early modernists set out to critique what they regarded, the 'decadent' social order of the West, by embracing an imagined authentic primitivism;

'...far from extending their social criticism to a critique of the reductive view of (for example) Africans promoted by European governments for colonial justification, modernists ... embraced a deeply romanticised view of African art as the expression of humans in a precivilised state.'<sup>23</sup>

This view referred to by Antliff and Leighton, was founded upon theories such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion, dating back to the Age of the Enlightenment, of the *noble savage*, lacking the civilising influence of the West, and Charles Darwin's concept of determinist racial difference, both central to the ideology supporting and validating the European slave trade. In relation to art, Gilroy notes the way in which, throughout history;

'Racial difference was repeatedly cited where critics pondered the inability of non-Europeans to produce legitimate and therefore authentic art. These distinctions were often... expressed in the opposition between primitive and civilised.'<sup>24</sup>

In other words, the constructed notion of the 'primitive' can only exist in opposition to the notion of the 'civilised' and as such, is a product of the exploitative relationship between colonial Europe and non-European cultures; 'the product of the historical experience of the West and more specifically as an ideal construct of conquest and exploitation.'<sup>25</sup>

In time, the European trade routes of the Atlantic, which had originally shipped human cargo from Africa to the colonies, transported examples of African artefacts to the West, where they became popular exhibits in museums such as the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris. It was here in 1906 that Picasso experienced an epiphany upon viewing a selection of African masks, which was to inspire his painting of one of the most influential works in modern art history, *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. 13), 1907 (Pl.13). This complex painting depicts five women, prostitutes in a brothel, whose collective, confrontational gaze challenges the viewer of the work, disrupting traditional notions of gender and associated politics of power. The faces of three of the figures on the left of the canvas are modelled upon ancient Iberian sculptures, whilst the faces of the two figures on the right hand side of the painting, are characteristic of African tribal masks. Considered shocking to original viewers, the painting was described by Picasso at the time in terms of an exorcism of traditional notions of beauty and artistic expression. Reputedly one of the most worked on canvases, the painting is also one of the most debated; radically challenging mimetic representation, the work is generally considered to represent the first Cubist painting and, as such, the inspiration for Futurism and abstract art.

In his extensive biography of Picasso, art historian John Richardson describes the way in which the artist drew upon a range of influences whilst working on the painting, including both Iberian sculptures and African tribal masks. Richardson explains the way in which the sculptures were of deep significance to Picasso who 'was convinced that people's magic and strength rubbed off on the things they wrought.'<sup>26</sup> Aware that the sculptures represented Spain's only recognised contribution to the ancient art of the Western world, these Iberian heads 'constituted Picasso's roots. Their altruistic power was a major ... source of strength to the artist.'<sup>27</sup> Art historian Natasha Staller describes how, whilst working on the painting, Picasso was also 'intensely involved with African sculptures – even arguing that he found them 'more beautiful than the Venus de Milo.'<sup>28</sup> Picasso worked on the painting over the course of two years, recording his evolving ideas in sixteen sketchbooks, and during the course of this time, repeatedly visited the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, where he viewed the African masks, telling writer André Malraux, 'The masks weren't just like any other pieces of sculpture... They were magic things.'<sup>29</sup> Picasso believed the masks to be powerful fetishes, and viewing them affected him profoundly, as he explained after seeing them for the first time, 'I understood why I was a painter. *Les Femmes d'Alger* must have come to me that very day.'<sup>30</sup> Although Picasso was later to revise this story, patriotically attributing the sole influence for the mask like faces in the painting to the Spanish Iberian sculptures, and claiming to have viewed the African masks at a later date, Malraux's account is generally accepted as it is substantiated by the contents of Picasso's sketchbooks and the writings of the artist's friends.<sup>31</sup> Whilst Picasso failed to give full credit to the aesthetic influence of African art on his work, focusing more on what he believed to be the spiritual properties of the masks, it is

clearly evident within the execution of *Les Femmes d'Alger*, that the way in which the human face was represented by the totemic African masks caused Picasso to reconsider his own representation of facial planes and contours. This new way of working is also evident in other paintings Picasso created during 1907,<sup>32</sup> and in his later, more abstracted exploration of deconstructed line and form.

By 1911 Picasso's explorations in deconstruction had given rise to Cubism, whilst the appropriation of the so-called 'primitive' continued in popular culture. In the period following the First World War, European and American avant-gardes again focused their attention on African art and culture, with the 1920s Jazz Age marking the rise of *Negrophilia*, a passion for all things African. As discharged African American soldiers opted to remain in Europe, rather than return to segregationist America, Paris was regarded by many at the time as a cosmopolitan centre of cultural exchange and Parisian society led the way in assimilating black cultural forms, referred to as *les fetishes* or *l'art nègre*. From Picasso's inspirational *objects d'art*, to jazz music and dance; black cultural forms were viewed as cathartic in post-war society. However, the myth of 'the primitive' remained and the stereotypical fetishisation of the black subject inherent within many of these artistic representations perpetuated the unequal representation of black culture within modernism.<sup>33</sup> Picasso's account of his first encounter with African art in the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro illustrates this fetishisation of African art characteristic of the period, but also importantly demonstrates the artist's respect and admiration for the pieces that so inspired him, as he told Georges Braque's biographer Dora Vallier;

'African masks opened up a new horizon for me. They enabled me to make contact with instinctive things, with direct manifestations which ran counter to the false traditionalism that I abhorred.'<sup>34</sup>

Despite the dominant ideology prevalent in early twentieth century European culture, which underestimated the value of non-European art, this statement demonstrates that Picasso's appropriation, or more accurately, his *incorporation* of an African artistic tradition into his work arose from an engagement with, and appreciation of the integrity of that artistic tradition. Thus, African sculpture might be considered central to Cubist construction and the development of a radical re-thinking of forms of representation within modern art. Whilst working on *Les Femmes d'Alger*, although Picasso was ambivalent to the full significance of this integration, he had in fact moved beyond a position of Eurocentric voyeurism towards a complete unity with a different artistic practice.

In his 1984 study of African art history Thompson describes the nature of African visual culture which 'pushed the idea that signs are migratory and combinatory, and that their signification depends upon their context.'<sup>35</sup> Art historian Courtney J. Martin suggests that Thompson's statement might be applied to the working practice of Picasso. Martin outlines Thompson's idea that through the enforced diaspora of African peoples and their artistic forms, there came into existence an African 'circulation of objects, way of seeing, process of making, and visual tropes form(ing) a continuous flow of visual matter that superseded the dominance of other traditions, mainly European.'<sup>36</sup> Although Thompson's work does not explicitly mention Picasso, Martin suggests that;



‘Thompson places this (African) art into art history and leads us to the other side of Picasso’s appropriation of African forms, so that we understand that the contact between Europe and Africa produced the decisive moment in modern art and modernity, resulting in the idea of connection as opposed to the one-sided sense of contact.’<sup>37</sup>

This *idea of connection* is an important one which recognises the combining of diverse artistic traditions which can now be understood as being different yet equal and related to one another. Martin notes that the *decisive moment* referred to has rarely been narrated from the African, or trans-cultural perspective, despite Thompson’s plea for a retelling of modernism, which would reveal that ‘black and Modernist cultures were inseparable long ago.’<sup>38</sup> Accepting this argument allows for revision of historically separatist narratives of art histories, and constructed from an explicitly anti-nationalistic viewpoint, Gilroy’s theory of the *Black Atlantic* provides that much needed trans-cultural retelling of modernism.

### **The Harlem Renaissance**

Thompson’s idea of the connectedness of artistic traditions across a black Atlantic world is evident in the shared search for social change which occurred on both sides of the Atlantic during the inter-war period. Whilst the Parisian avant-garde pursued notions of ‘the primitive’ in an effort to challenge repressive European conventions, (despite the fact that at the same time French efforts to appropriate, validate and re-interpret African culture were bound up with France’s history of colonialism and domination)<sup>39</sup> a corresponding movement for social and cultural renewal emerged on the other side of the Atlantic. Originating in New York, the Harlem Renaissance was a socio-political and artistic movement which celebrated an African American cultural experience, promoting equality and the rise of the ‘*New Negro*’ within American society. The New York district of Harlem had become home to a sizeable black community following the Great Migration after the end of the First World War, when many African Americans, like the soldiers who chose to remain in Paris, moved north to escape the segregationist Jim Crow laws of the southern states. This community attracted a number of intellectuals and artists; radical thinkers committed to promoting a new way of life based upon equal rights for black Americans in a society that recognised the black American experience as an integral part of the overall American experience. Activists and academics such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke articulated the ideology and aspirations of the Renaissance, with Locke recognising, from his observations of French *Negrophilia*, the ways in which art and culture might be deployed as a means of effecting social change.<sup>40</sup> Locke’s thinking was crucial to the flourishing of literary and artistic creation embedded within the movement. The philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance, published in literary works and celebrated in the visual arts, design, music and dance, extended beyond the boundaries of New York, with African American artists such as Aaron Douglas (1899 – 1979) Palmer Hayden (1890 – 1973) and Lois Mailou Jones (1905 – 1998) spending time in Paris. Whilst it has been noted that the French passion for *l’art nègre* exoticised black culture, perpetuating hierarchical stereotypes, the work of these artists, together with that of British artist Edward Burra (1905 – 1976) moved away from stereotypical representation of the black subject and provide an important chronicle of life in Paris and New York during this period. Historian Richard J. Powell describes the early trans-Atlantic influences of Harlem Renaissance thinking in Europe in his analysis of the work of Mailou Jones. Powell

describes the way her painting *Les fétiches*, 1938 (Pl.14) like Picasso's earlier representation of African tribal masks, succeeds in merging;

'an African art 'legacy' with the surrealist tendencies of l'art nègre, reinvigorating the African mask, sculpture and spirit, and transforming them from objects of a French colonial fixation to expressive ... components of a modern black identity.'<sup>41</sup>

In *Les fétiches*, we can see an example of the way in which artists of the Harlem Renaissance re-appropriated those icons associated with Primitivism. In her introduction to the publication celebrating Tate Liverpool's 2010 exhibition; *Afro-Modern, Journeys Through the Black Atlantic*, curator Tanya Barson argues that the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance extended not only beyond Harlem, but also beyond the period of the 1920 – 1930s, generally ascribed to the life of the movement; 'The act of appropriation by the European avant-gardes laid the seeds for counter-appropriations' and 'the work of these (Harlem Renaissance) artists remade European and American modernism.'<sup>42</sup> Tate Liverpool's 2010 exhibition, which included the Basquiat painting *Natives Carrying Some Guns, Bibles, Amorites on Safari*, 1982 and a silver gelatin print by Peter Moore (1932 – 1993) of an example of Basquiat's SAMO© graffiti, re-positioned expressions of black cultures in visual art in relation to Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, defining multiple modernisms, and further developing Thompson's idea of the inter-relating connectedness of visual forms.

Positioning Basquiat's oeuvre within the context of Gilroy's multiplicity of modernisms enables us to view the artist's complex and multifaceted work through a variety of different lenses, noting comparisons and contrasts with the work of other artists where relevant, regardless of nationality or racial heritage. In the previous chapter I compared Basquiat's early work with that of Twombly and Rauschenberg in order to draw attention to similarities in style and technique. Staller's description of the work of Picasso which 'separate(s) line, color, and space... articulating them with illustrational fragments plucked from the phenomenal world... (adding) letters, numbers... visual and verbal puns'<sup>43</sup> might also be aptly used to describe Basquiat's complex compositions. Such comparisons draw attention to the influence of those artists whose work he studied upon the visual aspects of Basquiat's art. Whilst critics such as Saggese have lamented Basquiat's lack of referral to the tradition of Harlem Renaissance art, comparisons between Basquiat's work and that of African American artists who preceded him are limited in that they rely largely on shared subject matter, rather than aesthetic characteristics. For example; Basquiat's concern with the African diaspora and African-American history resonates with the earlier work of artists such as Jacob Lawrence, but the visual aspects of the work of these two artists are noticeably different, meaning that any comparison made between their works would rely *purely* on content. However, as Basquiat's figurative work expresses a strong narrative focus, comparisons which address subject matter are equally relevant to those comparisons focused on materiality, within discussion concerning the themes of the work. Saggese compares Basquiat's work with that of Harlem Renaissance illustrator, muralist and painter Aaron Douglas, noting in Douglas' illustrations depicting African American life, not only a common theme but a blending of Egyptian motifs with aspects of European modernism, which is also evident in Basquiat's work.<sup>44</sup> Saggese employs this comparison in order to position Basquiat in an African American tradition, as an alternative to Marshall's earlier critique which highlighted comparisons between Basquiat's work and that of Western modernists. I intend to investigate this comparison further,

examining the way in which the content of both Basquiat and Douglas' work portray tensions within historical American racial relations, drawing from art historical and literary sources in order to engage with historical narratives which have often been suppressed. In comparable ways, both artists articulate the brutal histories of colonialism and the enduring consequences of African slavery in modern America, and thus, their work contributes to the discussion surrounding the need for a re-telling of these contested histories. This comparison will demonstrate the way in which Basquiat's work builds upon a socio-political tradition of black arts, but that this tradition need not be limited by nationalist boundaries, existing within a broader network of connected homogeneity, and need not therefore, be viewed as a limiting, racially defined construction.

Like Basquiat, Douglas was ambitious. He was also politically motivated, embracing Locke's philosophy that art of the New Negro Movement should focus on black history and culture, believing that he 'answer(ed) the call issued by Locke and Du Bois for an artist to come forth who could articulate visually the spirit and power of the Negro Renaissance.'<sup>45</sup> Douglas is renowned for his illustrations in Harlem Renaissance publications; modern Art Deco silhouettes blending Ancient Egyptian motifs with references to modern jazz music, and for the murals he was commissioned to paint on behalf of the WPA (Works Progress Administration) Federal Arts Project.<sup>46</sup> During his time in Harlem, Douglas studied under German painter, Winold Reiss (1886 – 1953) and drew upon a range of diverse influences. His illustrative style was influenced not only by Art Deco, but also by his contemporaries, such as the Mexican illustrator, Miguel Covarrubias (1904 – 1957).<sup>47</sup> Douglas' frieze format mural painting would undoubtedly have been influenced by fellow WPA artists, such as Stuart Davis (1892 – 1964) and as a socialist, Douglas would also have been aware of Diego Rivera's (1886 – 1957) Mexican murals. Reiss encouraged Douglas to study ancient African sculptures and Egyptian artefacts in the Brooklyn Museum, and throughout his illustrations and murals Douglas positions stylised, silhouetted figures and Egyptian motifs against Art Deco backgrounds featuring skyscrapers, symbolic of modern urban life and reminiscent of Georgia O'Keeffe's (1887 – 1996) cityscape paintings.<sup>48</sup> Within his mural painting, Douglas' layering of translucent colour, and incorporation of abstract, geometric form draws upon Cubism and the earlier work of German artist Paul Klee (1879 – 1940).<sup>49</sup> Curator Susan Earle points out that Douglas' exposure to modern art encouraged by Reiss, together with the many opportunities to view avant-garde art, available in New York at the time, meant that he was 'ideally situated and intellectually poised to take the universal distilling spirit of contemporary art and design into the visionary sphere of the New Negro.'<sup>50</sup>

In this *distilling* of multiple references, and in the themes of his compositions, there are similarities between Douglas' work and the later work of Basquiat. Whilst Douglas' utopian scenarios depict the optimism inkeeping with early modernism and the Renaissance philosophy, this is countered by recurring reminders of American slavery, still an active memory during the 1920 - 1930s. Douglas' first WPA assignment, the mural *Aspects of Negro Life*, 1934 (Pl. 15) is comprised of four sequential panels, tracing the journey of the captured African through slavery and into freedom. The first panel depicts an African setting, where figures dance within a circle of light radiating from a small crowned statue in the upper centre of the painting. The dancers are framed by warriors carrying spears, drummers and leafy vegetation. The second panel depicts an idyll of life in the Deep South. Again, music and dance are key motifs as Douglas depicts a banjo player and drummer seated at the centre of a

radiating pool of light, in the midst of forest vegetation. Behind the musicians, shadowy figures can be seen dancing whilst in the foreground, the dark silhouettes of chained African slaves toil in agricultural labour. Douglas considered music and labour to have been the Africans' main contributions to American history, and the third panel again depicts a musician; a trumpeter who stands to the right of the panel, accompanied by a female dancer. This scene chronicles a reconstruction of African life, as figures within the painting move away from the forest setting towards an urban life represented by tall buildings atop a hill in the background of the work. Central to the composition is the silhouetted figure of a man who points towards the hilltop, whilst those surrounding him look up from their labours to follow his lead. The figuration is dappled in pools of radiant light. In the final panel a lone saxophone player stands at the apex of a giant wheel, hand held high as if in salute, before semi-abstracted representations of skyscrapers. In the foreground of the painting several silhouetted figures struggle to reach the heights of the musician, whilst in the centre of the panel, the skyscrapers part, forming a way for him to pass towards the source of the light, which again radiates out in the form of concentric circles across the painting. The mural is painted throughout in muted tones of brown, blue, green and yellow. Through layering fine washes of oil paint, Douglas creates a diaphanous effect. The angular, silhouetted Art Deco figures and the vegetation within each scene are overlaid with geometric shapes, circles and prisms, which suggest rays of light. The work is laden with meaning, providing a clearly defined narrative in keeping with the rationale of the Harlem Renaissance; that through artistic endeavour, such as the creation of music and art, the previously enslaved African could move to a new liberation in the modern urban environment.

In comparison, Basquiat's painting *The Nile (El Gran Espectaculo)* 1983, sometimes titled, *History of Black People* (Pl.16) also traces the story of the African American diaspora, in a narrative that moves sequentially across three panels. The left hand panel is dominated by two African masks, below the word NUBA, denoting one of the earliest African cultures (the Nubian culture) of the Sudan. Using the word SALT Basquiat alludes to the monetary and political value associated with the control of the dispersal of natural products, a recurring theme which is associated with the controlled movement of people depicted within the painting.<sup>51</sup> The central panel depicts figures in Egyptian style vessels representing the ancient cultures of Greece and Egypt, further signified by the words AMENOPHIS (the Greek spelling of the name of Egyptian pharaoh Amenhotep III, inscribed on the side of the vessel) THEBES, SICKLE, NILE (partially deleted) and OWRIS, together with the all-seeing eye of Horus. As the narrative of the painting proceeds into the right hand panel, we are confronted with the figure of the slave, moving into American territory. Just as the emblem of the boat connects the old world to the new, Basquiat connects the Memphis of Ancient Egypt, to Memphis, Tennessee. The sickle like shape of the papyrus vessels are reflected in the tool of slavery, and whilst a 'DOG GUARDS THE PHAROAH', the emblem of the spider together with the word HEMLOCK signifies danger and death. The triptych on canvas, mounted on rough, exposed wooden supports, is painted in acrylic. Basquiat's expressive style is characterised by his energetic, multi-directional brushstrokes, as he layers bright, saturated colour (brown, yellow, white and green) against a matt black background. The painting is inscribed with drawing and lettering applied in oilstick, at times partially obscured, giving clues as to the significance of groups of letters. Basquiat's work is more abstract, less refined in execution and more subtle in meaning, than Douglas' yet both share a common theme; each artist reconstructs the enforced movement of Africans as a result of the Atlantic slave trade.

In both *Aspects of Negro Life* and *The Nile (El Gran Espectaculo)* the icon of the African artefact is used to symbolise African cultural heritage. In Douglas' work the totemic statue, reminiscent of Yoruba wood carvings, is a sombre, grey silhouette positioned within a circle of pale blue, in the uppermost centre of the first panel of the mural. The power of the motif is symbolised by the light which radiates from its source, filtering into each of the following panels. In Basquiat's painting the two African masks, also positioned at the origin of the sequential movement of the composition, are bold in both colour and rendering. Their grimacing, cartoon-like forms are clearly no re-appropriation of Picasso's appropriated masks featured in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, but rather postmodern, graffiti style interpretations of ancient forms. In their treatment of the African artefact, both Douglas and Basquiat build upon Picasso's earlier de-contextualisation of these forms into modernism.<sup>52</sup> David C. Driskell, who worked with Douglas in his later life, recounts the way Douglas wanted to create something new from Art Deco and Cubism;

'how he used the iconography of West Africa... the emphasis he placed on the black figure...the central theme in many of his compositions... (the way he) enhanced the special environment around the figure with signs and symbols of African identity (creating) new black images (which) did not have the ill-fated imprint of European imperialism and colonialism on them.'<sup>53</sup>

In relation to Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, both paintings foreground the African diaspora, recreating traces of an imagined past through a modernist figuration which demands consideration of a revised, expanded notion of modern histories. For Douglas, the interconnection between art and politics was important, and mural painting provided a public means of disseminating philosophy. Barson describes the significance of Douglas' work in negotiating, 'on the one hand an image of an idealised African American past as a source of pride, and on the other hand, a modernity that was contested, yet offered a focus for aspiration.'<sup>54</sup> This argument indicates the purposeful nature of Douglas' work; manipulating a visual aesthetic in order to relay a social and political message, resulting in a formal and visually accessible figurative style. Douglas' aims, inkeeping with the overall aims of the New Negro Movement, were to raise aspiration amongst African Americans, who were primarily the intended audience for his work. In contrast, although Basquiat during his lifetime expressed a desire to redress the historic lack of realistic portrayal of black subjects within modern art, and also addressed political issues in his work, he was never involved in organised political movements or activities. Basquiat's historical interests were more scholarly in nature, and his paintings, containing suggested and often oblique meaning, were created primarily as works of art. Basquiat chose to position his oeuvre within a different context in terms of reception, his works displayed in galleries being viewed mainly by art aficionados and collectors. However, this is not to say that the content of Basquiat's work is not political. Through his complex and sophisticated narratives, Basquiat constructs, and deconstructs the historic power struggles underlying modern racial and political relationships, and subtly proposes alternative ways of thinking. This comparison demonstrates therefore, that whilst the work of Basquiat and Douglas differs significantly in style, form and context, there are similarities in both the compositional elements and influences, and in the content of the work.<sup>55</sup>

## The Black Atlantic

This focus on the content, or subject matter, is one lens through which to view Basquiat's work. From 1982 onwards many of Basquiat's paintings depict a narrative of the African diaspora, providing a representation of transatlantic slavery and colonialism, through which Basquiat articulates arguments against racial injustice. As has been noted, in this way, Basquiat's work builds upon the tradition of those African American artists who preceded him, and contributes to dialectic surrounding reparative histories (previously defined in this study as a consideration of those particular historical representations, which appeal for recognition and redress in the present). However, this does not mean that Basquiat's work should only, or primarily, be viewed within the context of an African American, or black art tradition, as there are also valid comparisons to be made between Basquiat's work and that of other American or European artists (such as those comparisons outlined in the previous chapter). Although Saggese notes the way in which art historians have commonly focused their analyses of the work of black artists primarily on the content of these artists' work, often defined as 'black' subject matter, and notes that the supposed paradox between European style and 'black' subject matter has been generally applied in relation to discussion of Basquiat's art<sup>56</sup> I suggest that this is the position advanced by hooks, and perpetuated by Saggese. Whilst recognising English's argument that the categorisation of '*black art*' is no longer relevant, black representational space being subject to the creation, interpretation and discourse surrounding the historic construction of works of art, and questioning whether the post-black aesthetic might be applied to Basquiat's work, Saggese never quite moves beyond the boundaries of black identification in her study of Basquiat. My intention is to provide balanced analyses of Basquiat's work, paying attention equally to both the aesthetic and content, whilst at the same time ensuring that any discussion of subject matter does not confine the work to limiting categorisation defined on the basis by race. Basquiat's contribution to art history is not solely based upon his identity as a black artist, nor on the socio-political aspects of his work; as with any other artist, the significance of his work should be based upon the materiality of his art.

As noted previously, Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* provides a useful context to understanding the complex nature of Basquiat's polyvocal synthesis of multiple references, which I wish to expand upon here. Gilroy's theory, centred upon the journeys of the Middle Passage (symbolised in Basquiat's painting *The Nile, El Gran Espectaculo*, 1983) demonstrates the redundancy of nationalist or racially exclusive approaches in discussions of cultural history, in light of the intercultural, transnational development of the *Black Atlantic*. Gilroy argues that;

'the fractal patterns of cultural and political exchange and transformation... indicate how both ethnicities and political cultures have been made anew in ways that are significant not simply for the peoples of the Caribbean but for Europe, for Africa... and of course, for black America.'<sup>57</sup>

Gilroy describes how the history of the Atlantic, endlessly crossed by black people; first as a commodity, and then in search of freedom and citizenship, offers an alternative means of addressing issues of nationality and identity. This network of crossings has created a mesh of cultural exchange that allows us to abandon nationalistic and racially absolute paradigms in favour of a global, outer-national approach which transcends 'the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity.'<sup>58</sup> Gilroy relates his theory primarily to the way in which black British

communities 'have forged a compound culture from disparate sources.'<sup>59</sup> Although originally influenced by cultural expressions from Africa, America and the Caribbean, these influences are not viewed as dominant within this new hybridised culture. Gilroy illustrates this argument with reference to the music of multi-ethnic London band *Soul II Soul*; their 1989 single '*Keep on Moving*' not only expresses diaspora culture in its lyrics, but was produced in the UK (by descendents of Caribbean migrants) re-mixed in Jamaican dub style in the USA by an African American, and includes samples from older Jamaican and American records. The video shot to accompany the record reinforces this hybridised culture, featuring a diverse musical mix of R'n'B with classical stringed instrumentation, and featuring classical Indian dance and iconography together with modern Western street dance. For Gilroy, the 'formal unity of diverse cultural elements' within this record 'encapsulated the playful diasporic intimacy that had been a marked feature of transnational black Atlantic creativity.'<sup>60</sup> This articulation of a new culture, existing outside of the restrictions of ethnicity and national identity can also be applied to Basquiat's work. Thompson describes the way in which Basquiat's paintings, whilst being filled with information, are 'not about 'knowledge' from a single context (because Basquiat) confidently blended and confronted what was traditional and best in his cultural experience.'<sup>61</sup> Living and working in New York during the 1980s, Basquiat's work is also influenced by disparate cultural expressions, from Africa, North and South America and the Caribbean, and reflects this new hybridised culture described by Gilroy.

This compounding of cultural sources is exemplified in consideration of the following two paintings, created by Basquiat during the early 1980s. The painting *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta*, 1983 (Pl.16) demonstrates Basquiat's continued exploration of African American history, represented in his work at this time. Interviewing Basquiat in 1985, Tamra Davis asks the artist what books he likes, to which Basquiat replies, 'either ones that have facts in them or Mark Twain. I like Mark Twain books a lot.'<sup>62</sup> Whilst Saggese's extensive study discusses at length connections between Basquiat's work and the writings of Kerouac and Burroughs, (whose work Basquiat goes on to describe in the same interview as being 'really close to what Mark Twain writes, as far as the point of view... pretty similar')<sup>63</sup> to date scant mention has been made of references to Twain in Basquiat's work. However, as Basquiat also explained, 'I get my background from studying books. I put what I like from them in my paintings'<sup>64</sup> it is reasonable to suppose that much of Basquiat's understanding of American slavery would have come from his reading of Twain's description of nineteenth century American racial politics, acted out in the Southern states along the Mississippi River.

This painting on canvas is composed across five joined panels. Headed IN THE DEEP SOUTH 1912 – 1936 - 1951© this work again blends visual form with text in a dialectic concerning the relationship between the Atlantic slave trade and commerce. The surfaces of each canvas are painted over with several layers of acrylic, allowing some forms to be revealed whilst obscuring others, contributing to the ambiguity of subject matter within the semi-abstracted composition.<sup>65</sup> Within the first panel, a collaged black and white Xeroxed image of a man's head is revealed through layers of white and ochre colour, above the head is the inscription UNDISCOVERED GENIUS OF THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA. The image of the head is copied from a work on paper, made by Basquiat during 1982 - 1983 entitled *PPCD* and labelled FRANÇOIS DUVALIER. This image is clearly a likeness of Duvalier, the despotic president of Haiti between 1957– 1971. There is no clear link between this image and the inscription beneath it, or with the overall theme of the composition, and as Basquiat commonly used Xeroxed copies of his

drawings as abstracted collage materials this may have no significant meaning. However, Basquiat would have been made aware of the history of Haiti by his father Gérard who emigrated to the United States as a young man in 1955 following the imprisonment of his parents, during the period of political unrest prior to the Duvalier regime, so the inclusion may represent the artist positioning his own Caribbean heritage in relation to American black history. At the foot of the painting we observe a black rat and the inscription in Spanish ~~EL RATON~~.<sup>66</sup> The remaining canvases are composed of images suggestive of the link between slavery and commerce; oilstick renderings of a cow's head and udders are accompanied by the inscriptions THE 'COW' IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK (here the copyright symbol is depicted featuring the letter R) UDDER, ~~A DIET RICH IN PORK PRODUCTS~~ and PER LB, 49\$. In the central panel Basquiat lists; MISSISSIPPI VII, MISSISSIPPI VIII, MISSISSIPPI IX, MISSISSIPPI X and at the top of the fourth panel inscribes the name MARK TWAIN three times. The inscription of Twain's name is reflected by the inscription of the word NEGROES thrice in the final panel, beside a revealed lower layer of blue paint upon which is written COTTON ORIGIN OF. Within the Mississippi world chronicled in Twain's writings, black slaves and livestock were viewed by white Americans as economic commodities.<sup>67</sup> In this painting then, we see the way in which Basquiat, who did not visit the Southern states until 1988, draws upon Twain's work to reconstruct this chapter in American history. The fluid movement of colour across the linked canvases balances the combination of visual image and written word, engaging the viewer both visually and intellectually in the artist's reconstruction, also an intellectual interpretation created from his reading of literature and music, of the American South.

Writing in commemoration of the 2015 exhibition, *Basquiat and the Bayou*, at the Ogden Museum of Modern Art, New Orleans, project director Brooke Davis Anderson describes Basquiat's relationship with the South;

'a place he imagined more than he visited, a place he held at arm's length even while he was captivated by the power of the Mississippi River... (recognising) that the historical-cultural residue of the Mississippi Delta – its language, food, music, religion – enriched his influences. He cultivated Southern visions, rhythms, and obsessions into a singular artistic syntax that dripped from his brush like so much Spanish moss.'<sup>68</sup>

Basquiat's imagined Deep South; represented in a number of the artist's other works including the simplified *Revised Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta*, 1983 and *Jim Crow*, 1986, exists on an international level as a site of contested history. Basquiat himself had no direct connection to this African American history; his father Gérard's family in Haiti were 'from an elite, affluent background'<sup>69</sup> who identified as French, and his maternal grandparents originated from Puerto Rico although Basquiat's mother was born in New York. However, as Gilroy demonstrates, the impact and influences of the complex web of trans-Atlantic slavery affected diaspora communities across the black Atlantic. Basquiat would have developed his understanding of the history of African slavery in America, characterised in the life of the Southern plantations in part through his reading of Twain's fictional accounts of life along the Mississippi, and his extensive study of the biographies of jazz musicians he admired, such as Charlie Parker. Gérard Basquiat was a keen jazz aficionado and Basquiat had grown up with an extensive knowledge of this music and its origins in Southern blues. In 1977 when Basquiat was seventeen, the television network ABC screened a serialisation of Alex Haley's 1976 novel *Roots*, an account of colonialism traced through generations of an American family from the



capture of a Mandinka boy, Kunta Kinte to the author's return to Africa in modern times. The television series was widely viewed internationally, with exceptionally high ratings, and had a great impact in foregrounding colonial slavery, being followed in 1982 by the publication of Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prizewinning novel *The Color Purple*, (released in the cinema in 1985 to great box office success). These accounts situated depictions of colonial slavery in the context of the Southern plantations, and like others of his generation, Basquiat would undoubtedly have been aware of this highly evocative narrative and the dialectic it opened up. Basquiat's passionate investment in this subject is evident in paintings such as *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta*, 1982 wherein he broadens the scope of his consideration of the dehumanising effects of slavery, referencing the brutal Haitian regime of Duvalier, and accentuating this with his personal comment in Spanish, on the perpetrator of that regime, *el ratón*.

A further example of Basquiat's contribution to a transnational consideration of modernism can be seen in the painting *Natives Carrying Some Guns, Bibles, Amorites on Safari*, 1982 (Pl. 18) in which the artist constructs a representation of colonialism which merges diverse cultural references. Many of Basquiat's paintings are untitled; and of those which bear titles, it is not always known whether the artist himself titled the works, or whether titles were ascribed by dealers and collectors retrospectively. In this case, the complexity of the title suggests that this painting was named by Basquiat. The use of the term 'native' alludes to the dehumanising ascription of the 'primitive' or, 'noble savage' employed by colonialists in relation to those peoples colonised, guns and bibles the ironically paired physical and psychological tools of colonial rule. Through biblical reference to the Amorites, founders of the ancient city of Mesopotamia, and first dynasty of Babylon, famous for its classical culture, but eventually conquered by the Hittites, Basquiat notes the destruction of cultural tradition inherent within colonisation. Painted in acrylic and oilstick on canvas stretched over the exposed wooden mounts characteristic of Basquiat's work during the early 1980s. The matt background of the work is evenly painted in soft pink. As in other works, Basquiat contrasts stark imagery with warm, pastel or Day-Glo colour, which serves to enhance the brutality of his subject matter. In the uppermost section of the canvas the work is headed COLONIZATION: PART TWO IN A SERIES, VOL. VI, suggesting that this illustration is one episode in a history of colonisation. Central to the composition are two figures; to the left, a black man, dressed in rough clothing, holding above his head a crate bearing the logo ROYAL SALT INC© As in the previously considered painting, Basquiat uses the reference to a commodity, in this case, salt in order to suggest a link between economic trade and human subjugation. Above the figure's head is the crown the artist often uses to signify royalty, poignantly deleted. The face of the man is heavily lined, his mouth open with teeth bared as if in effort, and his eyes, emphasised in white oilstick are stretched wide in fear. The direction of his gaze is traced with an arrow pointing horizontally to the figure beside him; a white man dressed in a pith helmet and holding a rifle. In contrast, this figure is merely delineated in black oilstick; devoid of colour or detail, the character appears devoid of emotion.

The research Basquiat carried out to inform his compositions, using books and the collections of materials in local museums, together with the Twombly inspired blending of visual and textual form within his work, add significant depth to Basquiat's paintings. In this piece Basquiat inscribes in black oilstick detailed information in the form of notes, which are listed on the right hand side of the canvas. The meaning of Basquiat's inscription is always *signified* –

the viewer must decode his inferences in order to fully comprehend the work. Here, below the heading, Basquiat writes, 'JOLLY GOOD MONEY IN SAVAGES' the deleted colloquialism situating the speech in the narrative voice of Imperial Britain, and beneath this inscribes, VERSUS MISSIONARIES NOBLE, an arrow descending from VERSUS to the word GOD. The theme of economic exploitation is developed as Basquiat lists PROVISIONS above POACHERS, enclosed in a rectangular shape which emphasises the importance of this term, and elsewhere on the canvas includes repeated inscription of the words TUSK\$ and \$KIN\$ (the substitution of dollar signs for the letter S suggesting the difference between provisions as necessary items needed for survival, and these items, the spoils of the poachers, purloined for monetary gain. At the foot of the canvas is the caption I WON'T EVEN MENTION GOLD (ORO) an aside which serves to further clarify the artist's position in relation to this issue.

Below the enclosed emblem POACHERS Basquiat again inscribes MISSIONARIES. The complex relationship between these two groups of perpetrators of colonial rule is suggested by the listing of names; LANDAU, BISHOP (crossed over) and CORTEZ ~~CORTES~~ CORTES, an arrow connecting the Spanish ORO (*orro*) to the name of Cortés. Hernán Cortes was a sixteenth century Spanish Conquistador, famous for the defeat of the Aztec Empire during the Spanish colonisation of Mexico and South America, whilst Diego de Landa (or Landau) was a Spanish Franciscan, who became Catholic Bishop of Yucatan after the Spanish conquest. De Landa was zealous in brutally abolishing the native religion of the Mayans, inflicting great cruelty on those he sought to convert to Catholicism. The depth of meaning concealed within the iconography of the painting is drawn from varied sources, and expands the theme of exploitation for capital gain beyond the realm of any one nation. Whilst references to TUSKS and SKINS situate the narrative within the context of colonised Africa, references to the Spanish Conquistadors' search for gold includes South America in the dialectic of the work. Interestingly, the term used here for gold; *oro*, (Sp. *orro*) like the language in the title of the previously discussed, *The Nile (El Gran Espectaculo)* and the terms used within that painting for woman; *mujer*, and slave; *esclavo*, are written in Spanish. As discussed in Chapter 1, Basquiat was a frequent speaker of Spanish, and this characteristic inclusion of Spanish language is significant in positioning his work within the context of Gilroy's paradigm as Basquiat references all sides of the Atlantic.

Whereas Thompson's original concept of a *black Atlantic world* challenged a Eurocentric art historical canon by placing Africa at the centre of a dispersal of visual forms which influenced all other art traditions, Gilroy writing a decade later, rejects all nationalisms and proposes the *Black Atlantic* model as a single entity which prerequisites a totally revised transnational modernism. Engaging Gilroy's model therefore provides a more suitable context within which to consider the complexities within Basquiat's oeuvre. These early paintings demonstrate that, not only does Basquiat's European style of painting position his work within the broader context of Western modernism, so too does his subject matter. This is important in moving away from a binary perspective (such as that applied by hooks and Saggese). Fundamentally, Basquiat's combining of iconography and historical information which highlight the relationships between social and political issues across continents, together with his use of linguistically blended inscription, which presents knowledge from dual aspects, position his work firmly within an intercultural perspective.

## Picasso, Bearden and Basquiat

At the height of the Harlem Renaissance Alain Locke, passionately believing in African art as 'the most powerful force in modernism' and a catalyst for social change, interestingly declared Picasso 'the young genius destined to lead this movement.'<sup>70</sup> As previously noted, Harlem Renaissance artist Lois Mailou Jones alluded to Picasso's reconfiguration of the African mask in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, in her 1938 painting *Les fétiches*. The title of the work nods to Picasso's infamous appropriation, or inclusion, of the so-called *fetishes* of *l'art nègre* whilst Jones' composition abstracts the motif of the African mask into a fluid pattern of line, form and colour reminiscent of German expressionist Wassily Kandinsky (1866 – 1944). Picasso's influence can again be observed in Romare Bearden's *Prevalence of Ritual: Conjur Woman*, 1964 (Pl.19). This work in collage depicts the head and shoulders of a woman, her face rendered from sections of photographs of an African wood carving. As in Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, the powerful gaze of the mask like face of the figure engages the viewer of the work. The figure holds a leaf in one hand, whilst the other hand points upward. In her essay 'Bearden's Hands' art historian Jacqueline Francis analyses the way Bearden uses the iconographic reference of hands in his work to signify meaning. In this work, Francis suggests that Bearden purposefully uses the dissecting qualities of photo-collage in order to construct the hands of the woman in different skin tones, thus placing the figure 'outside the literal, and beyond the symbolically singular black realm'<sup>71</sup> In this way, Bearden builds upon Picasso's earlier manipulation of iconographic forms, in themselves migratory and combinatory, understanding their signification to be affected by their context. Within this work Bearden succeeds in placing the image outside of closed racial or cultural divides.

In common with other artists of the Harlem Renaissance, Bearden's work reinterprets conceptualised 'blackness' in an effort to redeem the image of the previously misrepresented black subject, but moreover, Francis suggests that, 'the fractured, outlined and discontinuous bodies in Bearden's representations make clear that race's political, historical and concrete realities coexist with the materiality of its construction, which is not guaranteed by nature.'<sup>72</sup> In the process of creating art, the intentions of the artist and the meaning of the work are influenced, not only by the singular experience of the artist, but also by the socio-cultural vocabulary of the viewer who interprets the work of art. For Francis there can be no 'singular conceptualization' of a black experience or 'related burdens (of representation) borne by marginalized artists'<sup>73</sup> as both black and white artists are only able to construct imagined representations of the past from sources already in existence, and these representations are in turn, subject to interpretation by the viewer of the work. In removing Bearden's oeuvre from essentialist readings, which place black art separately from a holistic European and American context, on account of its perceived link to an imagined Africa, on the grounds that his works 'are so evidently products of an artist interested and invested in a global art history'<sup>74</sup> Francis situates Bearden, beyond the category of 'black art,' and within the interconnected networks of Gilroy's model.

## The work of art as dynamic for radical change

Francis' argument is significant in relation to the overall theme of this chapter; Basquiat's narrative of diaspora and the role of that narrative within the dialectic concerning reparative histories, on several levels. Firstly, in situating Bearden within a global context, Francis' position recognises differentiated art traditions, but positions the artist historically within a

synthetic, rather than a binary context. In her discussion of Bearden's painting *The Visitation*, 1941 Francis refers to the artist's engagement of both European and Italian Renaissance visual iconography, and pre-twentieth century, non-Western sculpture in his modern expressionist interpretation of the Biblical meeting between the Virgin Mary and Elizabeth. Francis asserts;

'that universality often considered an ego-centric symptom of European and European-American subjectivities, was also important to Bearden, who creates places - plural - for blackness in his intertextual, modernist practice.'<sup>75</sup>

I have already demonstrated within this chapter the transnational character of Basquiat's work. To further establish my argument I apply Francis' description of Bearden's *The Visitation*, to consideration of Basquiat's painting *Obnoxious Liberals*, 1982 (Pl.20).

Basquiat's earliest drawings as a child were made copying illustrations from the Bible. Here he engages ancestry and modernity in a juxtaposition of slavery and capitalism. The compositional elements of the painting are held together by the artist's balanced use of colour; strong, unmixed hues of blue, red and green dominate, accentuated by splashes of pink and yellow, overlaid with fine black and white inscription in oilstick, and a fluid line of gold spray paint spiralling vertically down the left hand side of the canvas. This dynamic use of line is balanced by a tangle of arrows depicted in the top right hand corner of the canvas, together creating a sense of movement and energy. Basquiat's figuration is complex, drawing on the influence of Picasso and Dubuffet. On the left of the painting Samson, the judge and warrior of the Old Testament is depicted (in a style not dissimilar to Picasso's African inspired *Les Femmes d'Alger*) as a black figure, seen from behind, seated and held in chains between two pillars. Described in the Old Testament as a Nazarite,<sup>76</sup> Samson was prohibited by his faith from cutting his hair which was worn in seven dreadlocks. Here he is shorn and enslaved by the Philistines, but above his head Basquiat has inscribed the word ASBESTOS three times, followed by his name, SAMSON contained and emphasised within a rectangular shape. At his feet is the word GOLD. As previously noted, Basquiat frequently lists significant words three times, leading the viewer to seek the meaning of the term. The word 'asbestos' used here is taken from ancient Greek, meaning *unquenchable* or *inextinguishable*, in this context referring to Samson's resilience as a force of good, the word 'gold' suggesting his value. Here again Basquiat reinstates visual representation with language, which is signified; encoded allusions suggesting hidden meaning reflected in the hidden layers of paint on his canvases.<sup>77</sup> On the right of the painting a squat figure, painted in a looser style reminiscent of Dubuffet,<sup>78</sup> appears dressed in spotted shorts and a cowboy hat adorned with feathers. His bare chest is pink and tattooed with dollar signs, his orange face characterised by round eyes covered over by an X (a symbol used by Basquiat to imply drunkenness) large tombstone teeth and a straggly beard. In considering the clothing of this figure, Basquiat engages the values of Western medieval painting, in which clothing held great symbolic value; spotted garments indicating outcasts, the insane or criminal. This figure is clearly representative of capitalism and suggestive of the provincial Southern states. In the uppermost centre of the painting, is a crown above the inscription OBNOXIOUS LIBERALS© Beneath this emblem is a figure dressed in black, wearing spectacles and a top hat. Across his chest is the slogan NOT FOR SALE. His head at the centre of the work is encased within a block of vivid cadmium red and his arms are raised as if in anger, one hand holding aloft a bunch of arrows, his role as hero or hypocrite is unclear. Within the painting, the complicated use of line is controlled so as to lead the eye from the entangled

chains of Samson, confined between the vertical pillars, across the canvas to the dynamic mobility suggested by the multi-directional arrows, and this line also connects the ancient to the modern.

As in Bearden's *The Visitation*, in this painting Basquiat balances a range of subjectivities, positioning the black subject within a universal, modernist practice. In 1964 Bearden explained his understanding of universality in this way;

'Subject matter, I find, is of no importance, except... when it means a great deal to an artist who can transform it into something personal... something universal. If subject were just a matter of race and identity, then one could not have affinities with anything than one's own culture. What an artist brings to the subject... is equally important, forming a synthesis out of...several cultures.'<sup>79</sup>

Bearden's position was to be reiterated in 1964, by American artist Raymond Saunders who argued against what he deemed, the limiting concept of '*black art*,' claiming that the ascribing of racial identification to the work of an artist was restrictive.<sup>80</sup> Saunders proposed a race-neutral approach to art and art history, which was again reasserted by Basquiat in 1986, saying 'I'm not a black artist, I'm an artist.'<sup>81</sup> This position, akin to Gilroy's argument against essentialist versions of racial identities and nationalisms, in favour of a shared, heterogeneous, culture was later to be articulated in terms of a post-black aesthetic (to be discussed at length in Chapter 4) and it is within this frame that I position Basquiat's work. Basquiat's oeuvre synthesises references from international sources, both ancient and modern, and mixes diverse cultural elements, to form a new intertextual and polyvocal aesthetic. Basquiat did not, as Saggese suggests, 'fail' to reference black artists in relation to his own work, on the contrary, whilst through the narrative of his work he powerfully re-articulated contested black histories, he sought to position his art within a transnational context. Through a working practice which constantly references the canon, Basquiat locates his oeuvre in relation to that linear chronology. However, the demise of art history's Grand Narrative, and subsequent recognition of a synthesis of traditions means that we no longer have to contain works of art within singular categories.

Francis' argument concerning the creative agency of the artist in constructing visual representations of imagined pasts is also significant to the overall theme of this chapter, dealing with Basquiat's narrative of diaspora and the role of that narrative within debate concerning reparative histories. In her discussion of Bearden, Francis reminds us of the plurality of experience involved in both the creation and interpretation of images, which define painting as a 'conscious, interpretive act of representation, as opposed to illustration of an experience.'<sup>82</sup> In consideration of the role of artistic representation in reconstructing contested pasts therefore, it is important to bear in mind the fluid relationship between the artist creating the visual form; a singular expression of real or imagined human experience, and the viewer interpreting the work, who also views the work from a singular point of reception. The constantly shifting nature of this dual process is also subject to the influence of diverse socio-cultural vocabularies which both artist and viewer bring to the work of art, rendering art a process rather than a fixed essential entity. This means that the role of artistic representation in shaping meaning and understanding arises spontaneously from the dialectic initiated by works of art, which will over time, be influenced by the writings of art historians and critics. Francis' arguments against both a *singular conceptualization* of a black experience and an

essentialist positioning of black art separately from a holistic context, are as relevant to consideration of Basquiat as they are to Bearden. Like Bearden, Basquiat reconstructs through his work an interpretation of an imagined African American history, but this reconstruction includes not only African and American, but also European historical references.

In relation to the African diaspora, the work of art exists both in terms of aesthetic materiality, and subject matter which serves as a focal point for a theoretical return to history, in appeal for recognition and redress in the present. In this context, the dialectic initiated in response to the work of art, provides a site for a questioning and re-articulation of constructions of race and their re-workings in, for example, specifically black and diasporic aesthetic traditions. Basquiat's oeuvre has made a powerful impact in this area of social art historical discussion, building upon the tradition of radical artists like Douglas, and preceding the work of artists such as Kara Walker (born 1969) who continue to foreground ongoing discourse which challenge racism and inequality. Through his engagement with a working practice that progresses the role of creativity beyond limiting boundaries, Basquiat broadens the context and field of reception of his work. In consideration of socio-political art histories, Kobena Mercer highlights the need for a recognition that the discourse around 'black cultural politics... affects and involves not only black people, but white people as well,' and cites Gilroy's model as being crucial in providing 'a sustained theoretical framework' in which to discuss black art practice, because 'he clearly shows that simplistic dichotomies of margin and centre, left and right, or black and white, are no longer adequate' and moves beyond simple binaries which ultimately lead to 'an essentialising position which regards culture as a fixed and final property of different 'racial' subjects or ethnicities.'<sup>83</sup> Gilroy's paradigm places the concept of culture instead, into a dynamic, transnational diasporic context, and it is within this context that Basquiat's work engages with cultural histories and social politics. As curator Magdalyn Asimakis notes, 'Basquiat translated the world around him into a groundbreaking visual language that challenged, and continues to challenge, viewers' assumptions about the world around them.'<sup>84</sup>



**Pl. 13**  
Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O Version O)*, 1907  
Oil on canvas, 243.9 x 233.7cm.  
Museum of Modern Art



**Pl. 14**  
Lois Mailou Jones, *Les Fetiches*, 1938  
Oil on linen, 64.7 x 54cm.  
Smithsonian American Art Museum



**Pl. 15** Aaron Douglas, *Study for Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in African Setting*, 1934  
Gouache on board, 37.1 x 40.6 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago



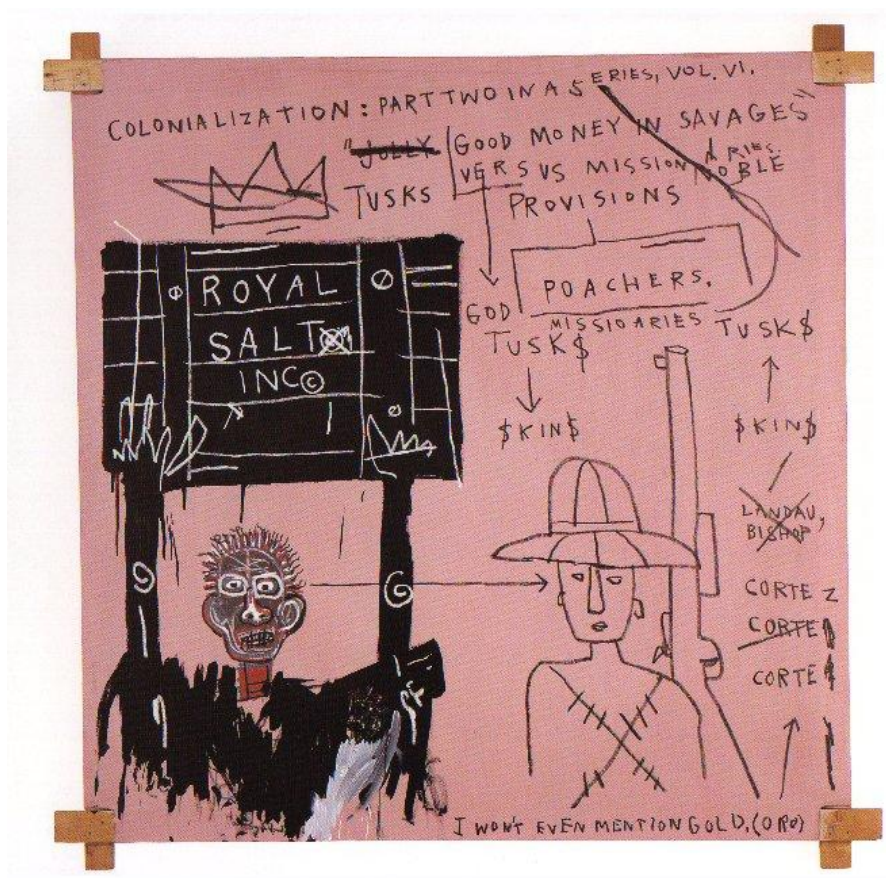


**Pl. 16** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *The Nile (El Gran Espectaculo)*, 1983  
Acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas mounted on wood supports, three panels 68 x 141 inches overall.  
Private collection



**Pl. 17** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta*, 1983  
Acrylic, oil paintstick and paper collage on canvas, five panels, 121.9 x 467.4 cm overall  
Private collection





**Pl. 18** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Native Carrying Some Guns, Bibles, Amorites on Safari*, 1982  
Acrylic, oil and paint stick on canvas with exposed wood supports, 182.9 x 182.9 cm.  
Private collection



**Pl. 19** Romare Bearden, *Prevalence of Ritual: Conjur Woman*, 1964  
Collage of papers, foil, ink and graphite on cardboard, 22.86 x 17.78 cm. Private collection.



**Pl. 20** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Obnoxious Liberals*, 1982  
 Acrylic, oil stick and spray paint on canvas, 172.7 x 259.1 cm.  
 The Broad Collection

## Chapter 3

### The griot as talismanic icon: diasporic identity and creolisation

*'I've never been to Africa. I'm an artist who has been influenced by his New York environment. But I have a cultural memory. I don't need to look for it; it exists. It's over there, in Africa. That doesn't mean I have to go live there. Our cultural memory follows us everywhere, wherever you live.'*

Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1988<sup>1</sup>

Basquiat was a storyteller; his narratives expressed in word and image on the canvas. Within the numerous drawings and paintings he created throughout the early years of his career he constructed a multifarious dialectic around the aesthetic and socio-political issues that concerned him. As he told art historian Marc Miller in 1982, 'I grew up in a pretty typical American vacuum – television mostly,'<sup>2</sup> and it is with the sophisticated diversity characteristic of the medium of television that Basquiat's work synthesises elements of modern and historical existence. The urban landscapes and cars, which form the subjects of his earliest paintings, were to be quickly replaced by the human form: policemen and janitors; boxers; musicians; and the cartoon characters of modern culture, juxtaposed with figures from an imagined historic past: biblical characters; emperors; kings and slaves, all populate Basquiat's oeuvre. Whilst describing himself as a New Yorker; 'an artist who has been influenced by his New York environment,' Basquiat was fascinated not only by the signs and symbols characteristic of urban modernity, but also by the myths and legends of global history, informed by his extensive reading. Basquiat's work provides an expansive narrative of the struggle for freedom and liberty enacted across the Atlantic by enslaved Africans, and articulates the artist's personal stance on issues of race and representation, capitalism and social class. Moreover, in his blending of culturally diverse ancient and modern intellectual and visual sources, Basquiat characterises the *connectivity* described by Thompson in relation to African and European artistic traditions.

The previous chapter examined the significance of Picasso's engagement with African tribal masks, and his belief that these masks were powerful fetishes, which enabled him to connect with an artistic tradition he considered more genuine than what he judged, the 'false traditionalism' of Western modernism. I have argued that Picasso's engagement with an African artistic tradition led to what might be deemed his *incorporation*, rather than *appropriation*, of elements of this tradition into his own practice. This distinction is an important one: the term '*appropriation*,' most usually applied to Picasso's engagement with African art, suggests the taking of something belonging to another. Within art history, the term '*appropriation*' is generally used to refer to the purposeful reworking of images, or styles, from earlier works of art, and is based upon an assumption of separate ownership.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the term '*incorporation*' implies an inclusion of one art form within another, in order to become an integral part of a new whole. This alternative view is based on Martin's reading of Thompson, which he applies to Picasso. Thompson describes 'the inseparable relationship between black and Modernist cultures,' arising from the enforced dispersal of African people and their artistic traditions, which created 'a continuous flow of visual matter that superseded the dominance

of other traditions’<sup>4</sup> throughout the black Atlantic world. Whilst Thompson’s view might be considered Afro-centric, Martin suggests that this recognition of the importance of an African art tradition within a global art history, allows us to acknowledge an essential equilibrium in that contact made by Picasso, between Europe and Africa, which resulted in the ‘*decisive moment*’ in modern art history. This equilibrium is based upon a fundamental acceptance that both European and African art histories are equally important, and should be viewed as such. Martin notes that this ‘decisive moment’ has rarely been narrated from an African, or trans-cultural, perspective, but that if we consider Picasso’s engagement with African art a ‘connection as opposed to one-sided contact’<sup>5</sup> this viewpoint enables revision of separatist art histories in favour of a trans-cultural retelling of modernism as advocated by Gilroy.

Writing from a purposefully anti-nationalist position, Gilroy regards the Atlantic as ‘one single, complex unit of analysis (producing) an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective.’<sup>6</sup> This position challenges nationalist or ethnically absolute cultural histories, and takes into account the ‘fractal patterns of cultural and political exchange and transformation (which) indicate how both ethnicities and political cultures have been made anew’<sup>7</sup> across the Atlantic world. Within the context of art history, Thompson describes this transformative quality within visual culture, through the migratory nature of signs and symbols whose signification is dependent upon their context. This transformation is evident in Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*, and also in Basquiat’s talismanic *griot* paintings created during the course of 1983 – 1986. In creating these works Basquiat, like Picasso, was inspired by African visual forms (featured in Thompson’s *Flash of the Spirit*), and his work invokes spiritual qualities associated with the mythical characteristics of these forms; particularly the subject of the griot, or *grillo* (Spanish spelling) as represented within Caribbean culture. This aspect of Basquiat’s paintings is examined by Kellie Jones in her 2005 essay *Lost in Translation: Jean-Michel in the (Re) Mix*,<sup>8</sup> which will be discussed in this chapter. Through this focus on the spiritual elements of the subject, Basquiat builds upon the intercultural perspective of Picasso’s earlier work, and pushes this perspective further. Moreover, through the incorporation of multilingual inscription, and American cartoon art, Basquiat’s work expresses a new hybridised creativity based upon the diasporic migration of sign and symbol. In this chapter I will trace Basquiat’s research into the history of the griot, and his transformative depiction of this talismanic icon, considering both the emotive and aesthetic contexts of his work.

### **Leaving New York**

During 1983 Basquiat travelled extensively, attending exhibitions of his work in Europe and Tokyo with Bruno Bischofberger, who had replaced Annina Nosei as the artist’s main dealer. Returning to New York in November 1983, Basquiat began working on a series of collaborations with Andy Warhol and Francesco Clemente (born 1952) initiated by Bischofberger primarily in an attempt to revive Warhol’s flagging career.<sup>9</sup> Basquiat and Warhol were to remain friends between 1983 and 1985, and Basquiat was clearly fond of Warhol and perceived there to be benefits in this alliance. However, it is arguable whether the collaborations between Basquiat and Warhol (or Clemente) contribute significantly to the main thesis of Basquiat’s overall body of work. Basquiat also visited Los Angeles on several occasions at the invitation of dealer and gallerist

Larry Gagosian, who exhibited Basquiat’s work at his gallery in Los Angeles in March 1982 and May 1983. Then, in early December 1983 Basquiat

travelled to California, where he remained intermittently until March 1984. Gagosian assisted Basquiat in the leasing of a studio on Market Street, Venice, California, and it was here that Basquiat began working on a series of paintings on reclaimed wooden panels. The paintings which included *M*, *Flexible*, *Gold Griot* and *Grillo*, were the first of Basquiat's works to feature his representation of the imagined figure of the griot.

The term *griot* originates in the Mali culture of West Africa, and describes the nomadic oral or musical storytellers who over centuries maintained African ancestral histories. In his semi-fictional account of the Atlantic slave trade, traced through the history of an African American family, Alex Haley describes how generations of griots who studied local tribal history from childhood, would travel between villages, telling stories of 'ancient kings and family clans, of warriors, of great battles, and of legends of the past' <sup>10</sup> Haley describes the importance of the griots in maintaining the history and cultural identity of a people, and symbolising 'how all human ancestry goes back to some place, and some time, where there was no writing (when) the memories and the mouths of ancient elders was the only way that early histories of mankind got passed along.' <sup>11</sup> From 1518, when the first African people were captured into plantation slavery in America and the Caribbean islands, enforced separation of families and the prohibiting of education for black slaves served to maintain the importance of the tradition of oral history; this storytelling often providing the only means of perpetuating a sense of cultural identity. For those enslaved Africans in the Caribbean plantations, ancient traditions and belief systems merged over time with Catholicism, the dominant religion of European slave owners, and the figure of the griot became the mythical figure of the *grillo* taking on a talismanic identity, and becoming seen as a magical fetish to ward off evil.

Basquiat's depictions of the *griot/grillo* invoke elements of both African storyteller and Caribbean religious fetish. Like Picasso, who believed that 'people's magic and strength rubbed off on the things they wrought' <sup>12</sup> Basquiat believed in the alchemy of icons and artefacts. In searching for the inspiration for the griot inspired paintings, it is necessary to first examine the artist's study of ancient African art and culture, before moving on to consider his engagement with the mystical qualities associated with the griot.

### **Flash of the Spirit – diaspora art and cultural memory**

As previously discussed, Basquiat is known to have read Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit* upon publication in 1983. This seminal diaspora study which traces the cultural migration of the visual objects, and associated belief systems, of African civilisations to America and the Caribbean, sparked an interest in African cultural history, reflected within Basquiat's work during this period. Basquiat initiated a meeting with Thompson in November, 1984 and commissioned him to write an essay for a forthcoming exhibition of his work at the Mary Boone Gallery in March, 1985. In doing this, Basquiat having studied Thompson's work, was purposefully aligning himself with the art historian, in the same way that he had previously aligned himself with Warhol. Basquiat was consciously situating his own work within the intellectual context of Thompson's *Black Atlantic* world. This considered action demonstrates that, contrary to negative critique which has often depicted Basquiat as being a naive, untrained artist, he was in fact, career motivated and intelligent to understanding the world of art and its histories. This move also indicates that Basquiat wanted his multi-referential art to



be viewed within Thompson's framework of the culturally interconnected Black Atlantic. Thompson's account of his initial meeting with Basquiat illustrates the writer's admiration for the artist and reveals something of the working practice of Basquiat at this time:

'We (Thompson was invited by Basquiat's friend Fred Braithwaite) rang the bell at 57 Great Jones Street. Jean-Michel came to the door. He welcomed us in. He offered hospitality from two worlds, star apples from Jamaica and an incredible French red, Château Montrose, 1961. I sat at a handsome table and sipped my wine and took in the surroundings. Jean-Michel indicated, with a gesture, that I could wander where I wished, photograph what I wanted. By the north-east wall leading to the street, a studio assistant passed, carrying paint to prepare a canvas. Canvases, in various states of preparation, in fact were everywhere. Assistants also hammered wooden slats together, making another kind of surface on which Jean-Michel would paint. Jean-Michel had a conference with his staff... Then he led me to a work in progress, *Flexible*, and posed (for a photograph Appendix 1 Fig. 5). He was dressed in a dark suit, dark shirt, relieved by a red and blue regimental tie. Reggae played from somewhere.'<sup>13</sup>

Writing more recently in the catalogue for the 2014 exhibition *Basquiat and the Bayou*, Thompson reflects upon the way in which Basquiat made art from the numerous written notes taken 'during a massive and ongoing self-education'<sup>14</sup> and in particular, how his inclusion of Thompson's own writings, in several of his artworks, demonstrate his 'love for *Flash of the Spirit*.'<sup>15</sup> In this essay Thompson analyses Basquiat's rarely seen drawing, *Untitled*, 1985 (Pl. 21) which he refers to as '*When God Came Down to the World to Bring Àshe*,' the phrase taken from his own narrative of the Yoruba creation story.<sup>16</sup> This narrative provides the inspiration for Basquiat's complex work in graphite and oilstick on paper, a visual representation of what the artist learned from his careful reading of Thompson's text.

The left hand side of the work is dominated by a carefully inscribed drawing of an ancient terracotta head, created by the Yoruba people of Nigeria, and copied from a photograph featured in *Flash of the Spirit*. Across the centre of the work Basquiat marks and labels the STRONG ZIGZAG PATTERNS described by Thompson as representing the lightning of the Yoruba thunder god, whilst on the right, is a drawing of an orange coloured yam, the staple food of the Yoruba, together with inscriptions alluding to associations with the colour red; of blood, war and fire. Beneath the Yoruba head Basquiat notes further captions from Thompson's text: AMEWA – KNOWER OF BEAUTY · CONNOISSEUR ÀSHE© These emblems refer to Thompson's description of the way in which the 'Yoruba assess everything aesthetically, from the taste and color of a yam, to the qualities of a dye,'<sup>17</sup> being *amẹwa*, or connoisseurs of beauty. The term *Àshe* is defined as God's bestowing of power upon humanity. *Flash of the Spirit* describes the way in which ancient Yoruba art was informed by the concept of *itutu*; the depiction of aesthetic coolness, or 'gentleness of character... the correct way you represent yourself,'<sup>18</sup> a teaching which would surely have resonated with the reserved, softly spoken Basquiat, often described as representing the epitome of *cool* in his tastes and appearance;

'Coolness then, is a part of character... (to) the degree that we live generously and discreetly, exhibiting grace under pressure, our appearance and our acts gradually assume virtual royal power. As we become noble, fully realising the spark of creative goodness God endowed us with – the shining ororo bird of thought and aspiration – we find the confidence to cope with all kinds of situations. This is *àshe*. This is character.'

This is mystic coolness. All one. Paradise is regained, for Yoruba art returns the idea of heaven to mankind wherever the ancient ideal attitudes are genuinely manifested.’<sup>19</sup>

Thompson’s reference to the assuming of royal power would no doubt have struck a chord with the artist who repeatedly crowned himself and his heroes in his work, with his signature tri-pointed crown, and who aspired to achieving nobility through recognition of his creativity. Clearly, this intricate and detailed drawing illustrates Basquiat’s considered reading of Thompson’s work, and the scholarly manner in which he researched, and shared knowledge, through the visual medium of his paintings. For Thompson;

‘Basquiat’s focus on the core elements of the Yoruba traditional religion makes clear that he was intellectually fluent, interested in exploring new ideas and images through his painting. In his citations of Yoruba sacred matters, he revealed love and respect for the cultural ‘facts’ – that is phrases, names, and images – that flow through his paintings from books.’<sup>20</sup>

So much of Basquiat’s art is comprised of knowledge, synthesised from his extensive reading; as he told Thompson, ‘I get my background from studying books. I put what I like from them in my paintings.’<sup>21</sup> However, the sense of *cultural memory*, of which Basquiat spoke, did not come solely from his reading of Thompson, although his ideas concerning a shared, collective memory originating in Africa, would have been reinforced by Thompson’s text. This idea of a cultural memory, inherent within diaspora communities, refers to the construction of a shared, distant past, held by individuals with a common heritage and was first developed by social theorists such as W.E.B. Du Bois during the early twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> For Du Bois, this collective memory, closely linked to the idea of a sense of double consciousness (a sense of being both African and American) which he assigned to African Americans, became the foundation for the pan-African movement initiated in the United States by Du Bois and Marcus Garvey during the period of the Harlem Renaissance, advocating a return to Africa. Thompson’s later work, written from an art historical perspective, does not directly discuss the concept of cultural memory in relation to identity, but rather, deals with the cultural transfer of objects and their associated meanings within belief systems: ‘Luminously intact in the memories of black elders from Africa, the goddesses and gods of the Yoruba entered the modern world of the Americas.’<sup>23</sup> For Thompson, this cultural transfer reinforced an organic *connectedness* of art and ideas across the Black Atlantic.

Basquiat was clearly influenced by Thompson’s work (although he did not ever discuss diaspora theories with the writer) but not all of his understanding of African culture and diaspora history originated in Thompson’s text; the content of his work at this time suggests that Basquiat was reading more widely on this subject.<sup>24</sup> Saggese points to Basquiat’s drawing *50¢ Piece*, created during 1982 – ’83 which illustrates the artist’s knowledge of Marcus Garvey’s 1919 *Back to Africa* campaign.<sup>25</sup> Another example of Basquiat’s detailed drawings on paper, this work is based upon a Jamaican 50 cent coin. Basquiat has drawn a portrait of Marcus Garvey, as it appears on the coin, together with annotated drawings of a boat labelled THE ARK, amidst a web of inscription which includes the phrase BACK TO AFRICA listed five times.

A similar drawing of the same period, entitled *Undiscovered Genius*, 1982-'83, (Pl. 22) shows Basquiat's notes and sketches made in preparation for the painting of *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta*, 1983 (discussed in Chapter 2). At the centre of the work Basquiat has carefully drawn a black, male figure dressed in blue jeans and a shirt, holding a guitar. Above the figure's head, emphasised within a rectangular shape is the title GRIOT and beneath this; BLUESMAN. To the left of the figure and in the bottom right Basquiat has inscribed; STUDY FOR THE BLUESMAN AND/OR MAN, UNDISCOVERED GENIUS OF THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA. The work also includes labelled drawings of a slave ship, navigational charts, the Statue of Liberty, sickles, forks and axes, together with inscription referencing: AFRICA - linked with an arrow to MISSISSIPPI; FREE MASON; LIBERTY; items of traded produce MEAT, FLOUR, SUGAR, ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, CORN; the Superman logo and the caption 'VERSUS' THE DEVIL©. On the right of the paper Basquiat writes:

Q: ARE NOT PRINCES AND KINGS?  
 ANCIENT AND HONORABLE  
 WITH NEITHER SWORD NOR SPEAR  
 DISPERSED INTO THE FOUR  
 CORNERS OF THE EARTH?

In these, and many other of the complex drawings Basquiat produced, we observe what might be termed *mind maps* showing the artist's thinking, based upon his research, and constructed in some instances, in preparation for future paintings. In this particular drawing, through Basquiat's imagery and inscription, we can trace the journey of the enslaved African across the Atlantic, to work in the plantations of the Mississippi, contributing to the agricultural wealth of the colonising state, founded upon the power of freemasonry. It is important to note, for the purposes of this argument, that within this visual narrative, Basquiat for the first time names the figure of the *griot* - the bluesman, or musical storyteller, maintaining cultural history in the tradition of African ancestors.

### **Gold Griot**

It is upon this foundation of historical research that Basquiat began work on the griot inspired paintings in his studio on Market Street, California in 1984. A photograph taken at the time shows the artist at work on the painting, *Gold Griot*, dressed in a white Armani suit and trainers (Appendix 1 Fig. 4). Basquiat's studio assistant at the time, Matt Dike recalls how he provided reclaimed wooden fencing panels, found at the back of the studio, for Basquiat to paint on; 'Jean-Michel was feeling sort of uninspired. He was really bummed out by the generic canvases they were rushing him to paint, so I started dragging in all these wooden fences and saying, 'Dude, paint on these. These look really cool.'<sup>26</sup> The spaciousness and light of the Californian environment is reflected in the materiality of these paintings made on the natural wooden panels; in contrast to earlier works created in the New York studios. The griot inspired paintings feature simpler, less detailed composition, a bright, limited palette and the use of gold paint. The photograph of the artist shows another, almost completed painting, resting on the wall beside the much larger work in progress. I believe that this smaller painting entitled *M*, 1984 (Pl. 23) represents the origin of Basquiat's characteristic visual representation of the griot as an emblem removed from the concept of the musical storyteller. The painting depicts the head and shoulders of a figure painted in acrylic and oilstick on the chalky white



background of a slatted wooden panel. This figure strongly resembles the image of an Ejagham Nnimm woman featured within Thompson's text. (Pl. 24)

Thompson describes how the Ejagham people of Cameroon and Nigeria disprove the myth of Africa being a continent without a tradition of written language, as they developed an original system of ideographic writing; signs called *nsibidi* which symbolised ideas and representations of power. The Ejagham community was made up of numerous secret societies, each characterised by their use of *nsibidi*, often to adorn ritual dress. Thompson notes that a creolised derivation of this written language, containing more than five hundred signs, survived amongst enslaved Ejagham captives dispersed to the Cuban sugar plantations. These slaves included members of the important Ngbe, or leopard, society who came to be known by the creole name Abakuá, and upheld values of black nobility. The Ejagham were aesthetically creative, particularly the women who were seen as being the bearers of civilisation, tutored in creative practices and the art of *nsibidi* writing. Before marriage young Ejagham women entered Nnimm Society and were adorned in traditional costumes: calligraphic lines were painted across the brow and cheeks; a myriad of shells adorned and fringed the dress; necklaces were layered richly over the neck and shoulders; monkey bones projected from elaborately plaited hair and a crown of feathers was worn on the head, with one single feather emerging horizontally from the back of the head. The Ejagham believed that the first woman came to Earth from heaven with this special feather in her hair, and that this marked the wearer as being 'different from ordinary persons.'<sup>27</sup>

The title of Basquiat's painting *M* is enigmatic, and as previously noted, titles of the artist's works were often later ascribed from dominant epigraphs within a painting, notes made on the back of a canvas, or word of mouth. The singular grapheme *M*, forming the title of this work may well be derived from the phoneme blend within the spoken word Nnimm. In the painting we observe, on the face of the subject, the calligraphic lines of white, red and yellow, the myriad necklaces around her neck, and the feathered crown, featuring the turquoise and white horizontal feather which denotes her singular status. Black lines running upwards from the shoulders of the figure suggest her arms, raised on either side of her head as illustrated in a diagram included in Thompson's description of the Nnimm, and the portrait is framed between vertical dotted lines and overarching curved lines also marked out in black oilstick. Basquiat's use of yellow oilstick to accentuate detail within the portrait, and the background of white on the rough wooden boards is reminiscent of Thompson's description of the way in which the *nsibidi* ideographs later developed into the creolised, sacred signs known as *anaforuana* in the Cuban barrios. Thompson describes these *anaforuana* as, 'calligraphic gestures of erudition and black grandeur, spiritual presences traced in yellow or white chalk (yellow for life, white for death)... on the floor of sacred rooms, bringing back the spirit of departed ancestors'<sup>28</sup>

This portrait, surely of the Nnimm woman, is a celebration of the aesthetically rich culture of the Ejagham, and the head of this figure is seen again in the later painting *Felix the Cat*, 1984 – 85, (Pl. 25) created by Basquiat in collaboration with Warhol. Here, against Warhol's hand painted images of the cartoon character *Felix* and scattered blue ribbons, Basquiat has painted two black nude female forms (one in classical style, the other in cartoon style) linked by the slogan 'NEGRESS TM© R. SGS.TMK.' Dominating the centre of the canvas is the head of the Nnimm woman. In this work the image alludes to the nobility of African womanhood, contrasted with the fetishisation of the black female subject typical of

Western popular culture of the period, and as previously seen in 1920s Negrophilia. The paintings clearly show Basquiat's referral to Thompson's photograph to provide the source for his own work. Although much has been written of the excesses of Basquiat's affluent and hedonistic lifestyle during this time, the painting *M* shows that during his stay in California, the artist continued to think deeply about the African art history he had learned of from reading *Flash of the Spirit*. As Thompson later wrote, 'His art became a kind of self guided scholarship... He was teaching himself the world.'<sup>29</sup>

This painting is important in informing analysis of *Gold Griot*, (Pl. 26) created during the same year, as within it we see the origin of the visual representation of the griot. Painted again on a slatted wooden panel, the larger painting *Gold Griot* stands almost three metres in height. The background is left unworked, allowing the natural hue of the wood to be seen, and this adds to the overall effect of the work, creating a warm golden glow. On to the wooden panel Basquiat has painted the black head and torso of the griot in oils, with detail inscribed in oilstick. On account of the title of the painting, we assume the subject to be male, despite his clear resemblance to the previous portrait of the Nnimm woman. Over his torso, white vertical and horizontal lines suggest the figure's spine and ribs, but finer blue horizontal lines can also be observed, suggesting a wrap of fabric around the body. The neck of the griot is adorned with blocks of yellow and red, outlined in white, and his arms are outstretched – the left arm is raised towards the head, the right bent downwards parallel to his body. Additional white lines suggest an alternative position for the figure's arms, and each of these gestures is taken from the nsibidi and anaforuana symbols illustrated in *Flash of the Spirit*.<sup>30</sup>



Thompson explains how these ideographs held aesthetic as well as literal significance, and were often marked on drums used to relay messages, linking the visual symbols with music; important in consideration of the griot as a musical storyteller. Possessing the power to record important events using these symbols was understood by the Ejagham to be linked with those descended from nobility. The nsibidi symbols were divided into two sets; those representing aspects of communication, relationships and everyday objects, known and used by all, regardless of their rank in society, and other 'dark signs' used selectively to symbolise danger – it is these latter signs that were to be developed into the Cuban *anaforuana* and which are represented in Basquiat's painting. Basquiat, who in later works was to include symbols taken from Dreyfuss' catalogue of graphic signs used by American hobos during the American Depression<sup>31</sup> and who repeatedly incorporated signified or, encrypted, iconography throughout his oeuvre, would undoubtedly have taken note of Thompson's reference to this ancient script.

As these symbols show, the predominant position of the griot's arms symbolise a 'dead body,' although the alternative arm position, suggested by the white lines in Basquiat's painting can be taken to mean 'all this country belongs to me.' If we read the meaning of these gestures in conjunction, the image can be seen to represent a figure now dead, speaking of the past glory of his people. As in the previously discussed portrait, the glory of the griot can be seen in the elaborate markings on his face; outlined in white, the head appears crowned by a ring of white circles, one section of his forehead is shaded gold, and red, blue and gold lines run across his brow and cheeks. His eyes and mouth are also decorated with beaded white marks. This mask-like visage of the griot is markedly different to the two African masks depicted in Basquiat's earlier painting *The Nile (El Gran Espectaculo)* 1983, further accentuating the similarity to the Nnimm woman. Yet there is also something sinister in the expression of the griot, with his elliptical eyes, one black and red rimmed, the other an unseeing white, and his grimacing mouth showing bared teeth. The menacing apparition, together with the ominous allusion to death concealed within the gesture of the figure, removes the *Gold Griot* from the earlier drawing of the bluesman, or musical storyteller, and situates this icon within the mythology of the Caribbean.

### **The griot as talismanic icon**

Just as Picasso considered the African masks he viewed in the Musée d'Ethnographie de Trocadéro to possess magical properties, Basquiat's *Gold Griot* conjures a connection between the aesthetic and the mystical. The work is the first in a series of paintings which increasingly draw upon and include references to aspects of Vodoun. This theme is explored by Kellie Jones<sup>32</sup> who rightly notes those concerns expressed by Okwui Enwezor on the subject of the exhibition '*Les Magiciens de la terre*' held at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris in 1989. The exhibition featured specially commissioned modern and 'tribal' works, similar in form but juxtaposed on the basis of a supposed binary between the modern and the 'primitive.' For Enwezor, arguing in favour of a globalised approach to modernism;

'The discourse in 'Magiciens' was still very much dependent on an opposition within the historical tendencies of modernism in Europe – namely, its antipathy to the 'primitive' and his functional objects of ritual, and along with this process of disassociation of the 'primitive' from the modern, its attempt to construct exotic, non-Western aesthetic systems on the margins of modernism.'<sup>33</sup>

Enwezor's criticism highlights the problematic nature of postmodernism's attempt to create a new postcolonial dialogue, recognising the authenticity of non-Western art, historically subject to negative stereotyping, whilst attempting to avoid further racist stereotyping through the ascribing of special, or in this case 'magical,' properties to this art, constructions which in themselves contain further racist implications. Throughout art history Western artists have engaged with the spiritual, with artists from Leonardo da Vinci to Basquiat inspired by Biblical narrative, whilst works of art inspired by non-Christian belief systems have been devalued as 'tribal art.' This consideration of Basquiat's aesthetic expression of the spiritual in the griot inspired paintings is problematic on account of the fact that his work has often been dismissed as being 'primitive.' However, whilst agreeing with Enwezor, Jones argues in favour of recognition of art which 'celebrates spiritual and metaphysical sources' and states that this type of artistic practice should not be considered 'off limits'<sup>34</sup> by black artists wary of being misunderstood, or stereotyped, by predominantly white art critics.

The terrain upon which postcolonial art and theory is grounded is a complex one. Foster, Krauss, Bois and Joselit<sup>35</sup> note diversity arising from context, for example; on the subject of racism – historically inflicted by slavery in the United States, and by colonialism in the United Kingdom. These different perspectives influence both the production and reception of works of art. The authors observe the conflicting demands upon black artists in either creating expressions of identity or in critiquing previously constructed identities. Artists such as Chris Ofili and Kara Walker engage what Mercer has described ‘the stereotypical grotesque;’<sup>36</sup> creating ironic parodies of stereotypical clichés. Basquiat also does this in paintings such as *Hollywood Africans*, 1983, discussed in Chapter 4. However, the griot inspired paintings are not paradoxical in nature; Basquiat engages the mythology surrounding this subject with no evident irony. Writing in the 1980s, in response to this dichotomy, critics such as Hall and Bhabba advocated a *third way* forward in postcolonial art, which lies not in a colonial past, or utopian future, but in a hybridity which negotiates diverse cultural space and time, and embraces new ethnicities based upon a foundation of cultural mix. This negotiation across cultural boundaries is expressed fully within these works. For Jones, Basquiat typifies the inheritance of ‘a hybridised African culture’ and his paintings ‘constitute a chronicle of the world in modern form, connected through waves of history.’<sup>37</sup>

In other words, Basquiat’s art characterises an interconnected aesthetic of global modernism, and therefore, recognition of the spiritual element within his work does not necessarily render it ‘primitive.’ Jones points out that discussion of this aspect of Basquiat’s oeuvre which ‘cannot be so easily contained in the African American context of the U.S. or the centuries of Western painting’ is often obscured in critiques of his art. However, she argues that it ‘reasserts itself in the context of diaspora, in the outernational culture that is at ease crossing borders and oceans,’<sup>38</sup> supporting Hall’s earlier noted argument. Basquiat’s griot inspired paintings reflect the connectivity of histories across the Atlantic Ocean, and the transfer of religion and its associated ritual, which developed into creolised belief systems, such as Santeria, Vodoun and Candomblé, indigenous to the Caribbean - described by Hall as the site of cultural hybridity. For Jones Basquiat displays in these paintings the cultural *mestizaje* he ‘inherits in his Haitian and Puerto Rican routes to Brooklyn.’<sup>39</sup> This positioning of Basquiat’s work within the realm of Creolité is commented upon by Saggese, who despite situating the artist firmly within the constructs of African American art history, also proposes that ‘Basquiat must have found a kindred spirit in Thompson, who like himself emphasized the role of the Caribbean and of the creole in his work and his life,’ finding in Thompson’s work ‘a meaningful connection between Haiti and Puerto Rico – the two sources of his own past.’<sup>40</sup>

This representation of the creole, inherent within the griot inspired paintings is synonymous with the construction of diasporic identity described by Hall and Gilroy. For Jones the paintings have a further significance. She proposes that through these images, Basquiat was ‘using objects and notions that tapped historical frameworks of African spiritual systems and their power (as) charms to ward off pain and death and to fight for life and strength on a mystical plane.’<sup>41</sup> This supposition is purely hypothetical, and whilst Jones may be correct in her thinking, it is not possible to know for certain, the motives of the artist in his choice of subject matter. However, the paintings show the way in which Basquiat was intellectually exploring and visually representing the myths and belief systems of the diaspora, as he had previously represented the more tangible aspects of diaspora history in works such as *El Gran Espectaculo*, 1983, discussed in Chapter 2.

The paintings *M* and *Gold Griot* were exhibited in a solo show at the Mary Boone Michael Werner Gallery in March 1985, (with the essay Basquiat had commissioned Thompson to write included in the exhibition catalogue) together with other paintings created during 1984 which feature further representations of the griot. In *Flexible*, 1984 (Pl.27) painted again on a slatted wooden panel, Basquiat has depicted the head and torso of a less ornate version of the griot, rendered in black acrylic against a white background. The figure's trachea, lungs and stomach are exposed within his chest and he has hair on his head and under both arms; these features suggesting a human figuration. The face of the figure bears a strong resemblance to the earlier griot, with elliptical eyes (one of which remains blank and unseeing) and teeth exposed within a fearsome grinning mouth, his features adorned in white and yellow calligraphic markings. In this painting the griot's arms appear snakelike as they loop upwards in a curved shape to join above his head. A further circular shape marked in brown oilstick frames the head and shoulders of the figure, and is intersected by a faint black line, descending diagonally from the upper right to the lower left of the image. These shapes again resemble those within the Cuban nsibidi derived symbols, in this case suggesting the symbol for *guerra y sangre* (war and blood)<sup>42</sup> adding to the symbolic nature of the image; the griot as a talisman of danger and power.

Jones draws further comparisons between *Gold Griot* and *Grillo*, (Pl. 28) another painting created by Basquiat during 1984, noting Basquiat's play on rhyming homophones in these two titles; the French spelling of *griot* rhyming with the Spanish *grillo*. This linguistic change also signals a subtle change of meaning, as the *griot* as storyteller, becomes the *grillo* as fetish object. Jones' analyses provide insightful consideration of these and other works in relation to Basquiat's engagement with elements of the creolised belief systems of Latin America and the Caribbean. Unlike the previously discussed works, *Grillo* is a large construction comprising four joined panels, one of which extends forward by almost half a metre, composed of work in acrylic, oil, oilstick, collage and nails. Jones observes;

'in both paintings we see the same smooth headed power figure. In *Grillo*, however, the figurative element is doubled: one body sports a crown and the other a halo composed of a black wooden bar topped with spiky nails... the strips of nails... recall the Nkisi power figures of the Kongo peoples.'<sup>43</sup>

Jones notes references to nsibidi signs within Basquiat's collaged notes on the first and third panels of this work, and closer examination reveals information from Thompson's text contained within Xeroxed sheets of notes collaged twice onto the structure. This appears amidst other sheets of notes showing reference to chemical and natural products and symbols taken from Drefyuss' *Symbol Sourcebook*. Basquiat is reported to have told Thompson, 'Andy (Warhol) collages photos, I collage my own hand,' and Thompson's argument that every detail within Basquiat's work is considered points the viewer towards a close reading of the inscription contained within Basquiat's collage.<sup>44</sup> This particular collaged paper is inscribed with words and symbols derived from *Flash of the Spirit*: at the top of the sheet the terms ARARÁ and RADA are respectively Puerto Rican and Haitian names for seventeenth century Vodú/Vodoun societies; below LEVANTAMIENTO PLATO and WINGS and sketched nsibidi symbols are taken from the final page of *Flash of the Spirit*, in which Thompson describes the Abakuá calligraphy used to honour the dead, and the *levantamiento de plato*, or removal of the dead person's plate from the table. Basquiat has noted 'P29' referencing the page in which

Thompson describes the use of nails in Yoruba artefacts to represent the swords atop the god Exu's head, and lists: EXU, ESU, NSIBIDI, TWO WORLDS and DOS SANTOS. The final term, inscribed twice may be a punning reference to anthropologist Juana Elbein dos Santos whose work describes the Yoruba belief that each individual is accompanied through life by their own Exu, and must restore through sacrifice the *àshe* devoured by his existence,<sup>45</sup> or may refer in Spanish to 'two saints,' in relation to the two figures depicted within the artwork.<sup>46</sup> Combining the various compositional elements of this work; the iconic figures of the griots, the words and symbols concealed within the collaged sections, and the inclusion of the nails styled on Nkisi fetishes, this complex painting reads like an incantation, constructed of power symbols.

Most dominant in the composition of *Grillo* are the two figures depicted on the first and third panels of this work. These figures display similar exposed internal organs, raised arm gestures and facial forms as those images of the griot found in previous works, but are less embellished, lacking facial markings. However, they appear none the less powerful than previous representations; their eyes and open mouths gleaming red and gold. The figure in the third panel wears a crown of shining gold. The second panel is marked by the power totem of the embedded nails. On this second panel, between these two representations of power, Basquiat has painted a simple dark green colour-field. As if in the distance we see the outline of a tower block, graffiti sprayed, and in the foreground two white painted rectangles, like billboard posters, the uppermost displaying a third head – a black silhouette, devoid of detail save for the elliptical eyes characteristic of the griot. In this way, it would appear that the artist resituates the griot within the context of the urban environment. Jones compares a further painting *Gri Gri*, 1986 (Fig.29) to *Grillo*, in relation to this silhouetted image. Noting that despite the variance in style; the muted tones and limited palette of the later work, the composition focuses upon a single figure;

'taxonomically following directly from the 1984 works... A single almond-shaped eye leads us back through the genealogy of its brothers in Cabeza, Gold Griot and Grillo (and I would add M and Flexible) this figure in profile has more in common with another that begins to come into view around this time... a simple, black mask-like head with eyes like ellipses.'<sup>47</sup>

Jones explains that the *gri-gri* (or French spelling *gris-gris*) is a Vodou charm, believed to possess protective forces, which is part of the spiritual practice transported to America, and in particular, New Orleans, in the second wave of diaspora by plantation owners and slaves fleeing Haiti during the revolution of the early nineteenth century. Basquiat is known to have had knowledge of, and a belief in, aspects of Vodou. Susanne Mallouk describes the artist owning, and being fiercely protective of, 'a Haitian Voodoo statue that stood about three feet tall with a little bag around its neck... crudely carved out of dark wood,'<sup>48</sup> and Thompson describes observing Basquiat stop at a busy crossroads 'to make what Afro-Cubans call ebo: a sacrifice to the forces of the crossroads.'<sup>49</sup> Derived from Santería these sacrifices are made to honour orisha such as Exu. Basquiat also spoke to Geldzhaler of his belief in the alchemy associated with his own artistic practice saying, 'I was writing gold on all this stuff and I made all this money right afterwards.'<sup>50</sup> Although Basquiat's interest in Haitian Vodou was unlikely to have been learned from his Westernised and conservative father Gérard, Mallouk suggests that his mother had learned about Vodou and taught Jean-Michel about this at a young age.<sup>51</sup> Certainly aspects of creolised religion would have been inherent within the multicultural

communities of New York where Basquiat grew up. Jones discusses further artworks, including *The Guilt of Gold Teeth*, 1982 and *Después de un Puno*, 1987 which she interprets as featuring the Vodoun character Baron Samedi, the keeper of cemeteries, in support of her thesis that these paintings were created by Basquiat as protective talismans in his struggle with issues relating to his own mortality.

### Creolité and creolisation

Jones' argument that the griot inspired works were created by Basquiat as talismanic icons is plausible whilst remaining unproven. However, Jones' essay is important on several levels. Firstly, it outlines clearly the way in which Basquiat's work demonstrates not only his extensive study of history, but also his deep consideration of the spiritual. This is expressed in relation to Christian iconography in Basquiat's earliest works. Chapter 2 examined Basquiat's references to the Biblical hero, Samson in the painting *Obnoxious Liberals*, 1982. In his earliest works the artist includes emblems such as the Catholic sacred heart, and makes reference to Jesus. The painting *Untitled (Fallen Angel)* 1981 is a detailed portrait of an anguished angel, his mortality suggested by the exposed detail of his internal organs, juxtaposed by his radiant halo and fiery wings, and *Untitled (Baptism)* 1982 depicts a haloed figure baptising another, possibly Christ, in a river. The compositional subjects of these works, and their painterly qualities, are reminiscent of Renaissance art, and may reflect the paintings Basquiat was viewing at the time, in books and museums. Mayer has commented upon the way in which 'Angels, crowns, haloes, devils, saints, martyrs – all figure prominently in Basquiat's work,' describing those paintings he categorises 'icons' as possessing 'a familiar ritual function, not unlike the West African masks that (he) collected... the functional Vodoun and Santeria figurines of his Caribbean roots... or Western religious icons and statuettes meant to embody a given saint.'<sup>52</sup>

Secondly, Jones highlights what is in fact, so compelling about Basquiat's work; the way in which he blends together histories and cultures within his oeuvre, creating a 'space of communion, community and connectivity.'<sup>53</sup> I have compared Basquiat's connection of elements of visual culture from across the Atlantic to that early, notable connection made across centuries and continents by Picasso. Whilst recognising the way in which other artists of the early twentieth century Parisian avant-garde, such as Mäilou Jones and Wifredo Lam followed Picasso's lead in creating studies of the African tribal mask, transformed into geometric abstractions, this comparison provides a model for examination of the innovative dynamic within this space of connectivity. My comparison between the work of Picasso and Basquiat demonstrates the way in which both artists connect both visual and cultural influences from across the black Atlantic, creating representations of a new hybrid aesthetic in doing so. Whilst Picasso verbally expressed a concern with the spiritual aspects of the icons he depicted, this same concern is visually expressed in Basquiat's art. In the work of both artists, the religious icon is transformed into aesthetic object, whilst the spiritual element of the icon is acknowledged.

In his study of Cuban Surrealist artist Lam, Mosquera outlines a perspective which recognises the Eurocentric nature of Western art history, developed globally out of industrial capitalism. He notes that, 'Art itself, as a self-sufficient activity based on aesthetics, is also the product of Western culture exported to the rest of the world'<sup>54</sup> which has historically failed to recognise non-Western artistic traditions based on religious or commemorative representation. Mosquera argues that whilst Lam's Afro-Cuban cultural sources are generally recognised, they

have been displaced; 'subordinated to Western avant-garde art...(never) examined from the point of view of their own effect on that art, in terms of their own particular construction of contemporary 'high' culture.' Mosquera argues that this displacement means, within critique of Lam's work;

'the emphasis would no longer be placed on the intervention of these cultural elements in Surrealism; rather, this movement would be seen as a space in which those elements are given expression outside their traditional sphere, transformed into agents of the avant-garde culture by themselves.' <sup>55</sup>

Lam was greatly influenced by Picasso, who he spent time with in Paris during the 1930s. During this period Lam moved away from his earlier Spanish Surrealist style towards Picasso inspired Cubism, based upon interpretation of African tribal art. However, upon his return to Cuba in 1942 Lam returned to a Surrealist style, his work developing into what Mosquera describes as, 'the first vision ever of modern art from the standpoint of Africa within Latin America.' <sup>56</sup> Much of Lam's work revolves around the mythology of Cuban folklore and contains multiple visual references to Ellegùà (Exu) a character later represented in Basquiat's work. Mosquera claims Lam's significance as the first modern artist to base his work upon 'elements of African heritage that remained alive in Cuban culture,' and argues that his interpretation of Lam's work, from this viewpoint, contributes to a new way of thinking about art, 'leading to a multifocal, multiethnic decentralization of 'international' culture.' <sup>57</sup> This description is relevant as it can also be applied to Basquiat's work, although Basquiat goes further than Lam in his synthesis of multiethnic elements which decentralise his work, making it truly *inter-national* in nature.

Mosquera, like Hall, emphasises the importance of the Caribbean as a primal site of cultural transformation: 'the space where the creolisations and assimilations and syncretisms were negotiated.' <sup>58</sup> This Caribbean Creolité is also discussed by Thompson, as being an important factor in the way in which Basquiat's oeuvre captures fully, his concept of the transformative migration of signs and symbols across the Atlantic. He writes;

'From painting to painting we recognize a major source of power: self-creolisation... being fluent in several languages and knowing how to fuse them to effect... reflecting his connections with the art world of (each) country, while painting Afro-Atlantic random accentuations in design.' <sup>59</sup>

Basquiat was born in Brooklyn, and apart from two years spent in Puerto Rico during his early teens, lived all his life in New York. However, his work is informed by his Caribbean heritage, as much as it is by his American experience, and reflects the cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of the Caribbean, and this is particularly evident within the griot paintings. Moreover, within these works Basquiat's intertextual dialogic moves beyond previous cultural synthesis, as he situates the mythical *grillo* firmly within the realms of Western popular culture.

### **Across the Black Atlantic: from Picasso to Massive Attack**

In *Water Worshipper*, 1984 (Pl. 30) Basquiat deploys the image of the creolised griot to connect the old world to the new. This painting, which was featured in the 2015 retrospective at the Art Gallery Ontario, was sold at Sotheby's, London in February, 2014 for £2,490,500. The



auction catalogue traces the provenance of the painting from the Mary Boone Gallery, New York in 1985, to Galerie Beaubourg, Paris in 1988, and a further private collection in France, before the most recent sale. The catalogue notes describe the painting as being, 'A work of commanding authority that exudes a visceral sensation of power and vitality... imbued with diverse allusions to Haitian mythology, African identity and American cultural history.'<sup>60</sup>

The painting is rendered in acrylic and oilstick on wooden board is mounted on a base constructed of the reclaimed wooden panels featured in earlier works. In the upper centre is a circular, golden sun positioned so as to unite the two sides of the painting. To the right, against a white ground, is the figure of a manacled slave; his head and shoulders framed within a lifebuoy, the emblem taken from a logo featured on Player's Navy Cut cigarette packets. Behind the slave's head the ocean and two ships can be seen, clearly symbolising the Atlantic slave trade. The arms of the slave are raised in a gesture previously seen in *Gold Griot*, taken from the nsibidi sign meaning, 'all this land belongs to me,' although in this representation the gesture appears more one of despair. Basquiat has left revealed a fragment of the yellow painted surface below the white colour ground, which suggests that this figure is holding aloft a snake, a symbol of the African water deity, Mami Wata. This mythical figure is a transformation of the Yoruba orisha, Yemoja, a river deity and mother of all other orishas. Usually represented as a woman, she appears in various forms holding a snake as an emblem of divinity. Possessed of both good and evil attributes, this orisha took on powerful symbolism for enslaved Africans who crossed the water in captivity, and her legend spread in various forms within creolised belief systems. The body of the slave appears as a sarcophagus, reinforcing the signification of the figure's captivity, further enforced by the inclusion of a long metal bar to the far right of the painting.

The background of a large rectangular shape on the left of the painting left uncovered by white paint is black, accentuated by blocks of cerulean blue, phthalo blue green and cobalt, giving the impression of a night sky. This strong, dark colour block appears dominant within the overall composition and within it is the figure of a griot. Standing strong with legs apart and arms spread wide, with fingers stretched, his mouth open as if in gleeful call; this griot is a figure of power and strength. He stands on a small white pedestal, behind him appears a golden glow and above his head a white halo, emblems of his divinity. The griot appears as if in a vision, an avatar from the spirit world - and his presence is glorious. Here, Basquiat has developed the subject of the griot, bestowing upon it an appearance resonant with modern cartoon culture. Sotheby's catalogue notes describe the figure as 'doll like,' drawing comparisons with American Indian Kachina dolls and more accurately, a Kongo Ngobudi face mask featured in the auction catalogue. Like Picasso, Basquiat has incorporated imagery from historic African artefacts into his rendition of this deity, which appears at the same time thoroughly modern. Dressed in a red feathered cap, white neckband and loincloth, his outstretched arms are adorned with black bands and a white plate upon his chest is adorned with a red flame. As in earlier invocations of the griot, his black elliptical eyes are outlined in white, and his smiling mouth reveals strong white teeth. However, unlike previous depictions in which the subject of the griot appears infused with a sinister power and sense of menace, this particular orisha appears animated, joyful and lively. He seems to burst onto the scene of the painting, with all the vibrancy of Pop culture. To quote Jones, the icon of the griot is now 'more clearly articulated to resemble a superhero.'<sup>61</sup>

Jones describes the transmutation of the silhouetted form of the griot featured in *Grillo*, 1984 to the shadowy figure represented in *Gri-Gri*, 1986 as a *hyperquote*; an artefact generating multiple intertextual references.<sup>62</sup> This multiple intertextuality signified in the depiction of Basquiat's griot operates powerfully, connecting aesthetic, religious and cultural references across space and time. From 1984 onwards, the emblem of the griot appears in several of Basquiat's paintings, both overtly and covertly. In *J's Milagro*, 1985 (Sp. *J's Miracle*) a triptych on door panels, the griot is painted twice, amidst representations of the human form, human organs and an upright snake, over a background collaged with inscription and a self portrait.<sup>63</sup> Whilst the title of this work identifies it as a *Milagro*, or charm, and thus retains an element of the spiritual, in the painting *Tenor*, 1985 (Pl. 31), Basquiat situates the griot within the context of the jazz music he so admired. Painted in strong black acrylic, the figure presides over a heavily collaged background, and painted figures of a mouse, RATÓN, a spider and several black, orange beaked birds. These birds represent jazz musician Charlie Parker<sup>64</sup> and within the collage are concealed further references to the TENOR and the repeated refrain SOFTEN IT WITH AN OBOE. Within this work the talismanic griot is transported from the realms of African history and Caribbean mythology, to the world of modern American jazz. The subject, now depicted in cartoon style, with swirling arms and widely grinning mouth, is powerfully predominant over the lively references to musicality. In this work Basquiat employs the icon of griot to lay claim to this celebrated aspect of black culture.

In *To Be Titled*, 1987, (Pl. 32) the familiar subject appears disguised, depicted in green, and wearing a mask and sombrero above the caption LONE RANGER. This semi-abstract work brings together numerous emblems of Western capitalism: the Kellogg's cornflake and James Bond 007 logos; captions promoting DE WITT FEDERATED HOTELS, FLAME GRILLED CHEESE, FREE (FOR A LIMITED TIME ONLY) and ironically, MOUTH TESTED FFO R ESTHETICS. Basquiat has also included a symbol from Dreyfuss' Symbol Sourcebook, and its meaning: GOOD PLACE FOR A HANDOUT. Amidst these references to consumerism is a black porter, dressed in blue cap and overalls and wearing labelled WHITE GLOVES. His lips are cartoonishly large, and he pushes a laden luggage trolley towards the emblem BLUE; an ironic allusion to the traditional role of blue collar worker, historically ascribed to black men within American society. Positioned at the top centre of this painting, the griot appears to watch over the scene. Beneath him is a fighter plane, firing ammunition on the scene below, the tiny silhouette of its pilot is labelled ME. The griot here, transformed into a comic book hero appears aligned with the artist in a visual destruction of the manifestations of Western capitalism.

Basquiat aligns himself with this imaginary figure again in the previously described photograph featured on the cover of a 1985 New York Times magazine (Appendix 1). The photograph taken in Basquiat's Great Jones Street studio, shows the artist seated in front of the painting *Untitled*, 1985; a triptych of three wooden panels, featuring the smiling griot, a silhouetted power figure that in this context, appears to watch over its creator. Through the visual representation of this talismanic icon, Basquiat references the diverse expressive cultures of the Atlantic. In this photograph, the griot icon appears juxtaposed with representations of Western commercialism suggested by the designer furniture and clothing worn by Basquiat, and is situated within the domain of the Western art world. Sampling African and Caribbean art and religious iconography, and mixing these references with symbols of the music and cartoon culture of postmodern America, Basquiat's work characterises that 'playful diasporic intimacy' described by Gilroy as being 'a marked feature of transnational black Atlantic

creativity.’<sup>65</sup> Basquiat’s *griot*, *grillo* or *gris-gris* is situated within his oeuvre as a representation of African history, Caribbean religious fetish and modern day talisman.

Basquiat’s representation of the griot is transfigured again, in the work of Bristol artist and musician Robert Del Naja (born 1965). Del Naja has described the way in which the art and music coming out of 1980s New York, ‘like Kingston, Jamaica, before it – began to shape and influence the subculture of Bristol,’<sup>66</sup> creating a unifying social force which transversed racial and class boundaries. As an ethnically diverse port whose origins were built on the history of the Atlantic slave trade, the city of Bristol encapsulates the connectivity of the black Atlantic described by Gilroy. For Del Naja, working as a young graffiti artist under the pseudonym 3D, in Bristol during the 1980s; ‘the influence of Basquiat was always there. He made the possibilities seem limitless. His style was not something you could copy, although you could try to steal a bit.’<sup>67</sup> Del Naja has appropriated, or as I have previously argued in relation to Picasso, *incorporated*, the icon of Basquiat’s griot, into his own work in a number of paintings. In *King Jean White*, 1989 (Pl. 33) the griot appears as a shadowy figure, adorned with the exposed skeleton and tri-pointed crown reminiscent of Basquiat’s work. Del Naja describes the powerful social commentary within Basquiat’s work thus:

‘He painted in a raw and confrontational way. He abused the canvas with chaotic composition and intense primary colours. It wasn’t just his imagery but the juxtaposed cultural references: media saturation, brand communication, power, poverty, African history, colonialisation and exploitation... part manifesto and part hit list.’<sup>68</sup>

Del Naja’s explicit referencing of Basquiat’s griot demonstrates again both that connection across the black Atlantic, outlined by Thompson, and developed in Gilroy’s arguments of the way in which cultural exchange, over time, across this single unit of analysis, leads ultimately to an explicitly transnational, intercultural perspective. It is within this context that the potency of Basquiat’s work is clear, as he uses the emblem of the griot, with all its historic and spiritual references, as hyperquote generating that intercultural connectivity.







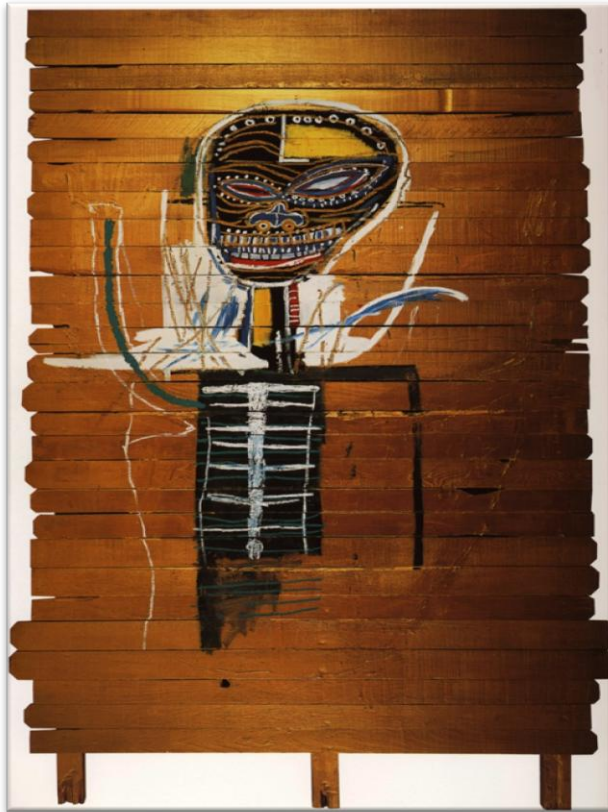
**Pl. 23** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *M*, 1984  
Acrylic and oilstick on wood, 241.3 x 186.7 cm.  
Private collection



**Pl. 24** Photograph of Nimm woman by  
Thompson, R.F. *In* Thompson, R.F. 1984  
p.234



**Pl. 25** Jean-Michel Basquiat & Andy Warhol, *Felix the Cat*, 1984  
Acrylic on canvas, 294 x 406 cm.  
Private collection



**Pl. 26** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Gold Griot*, 1984  
 Oil and oil paintstick on wood, 297.2 x 185.4 cm.  
 The Broad Foundation

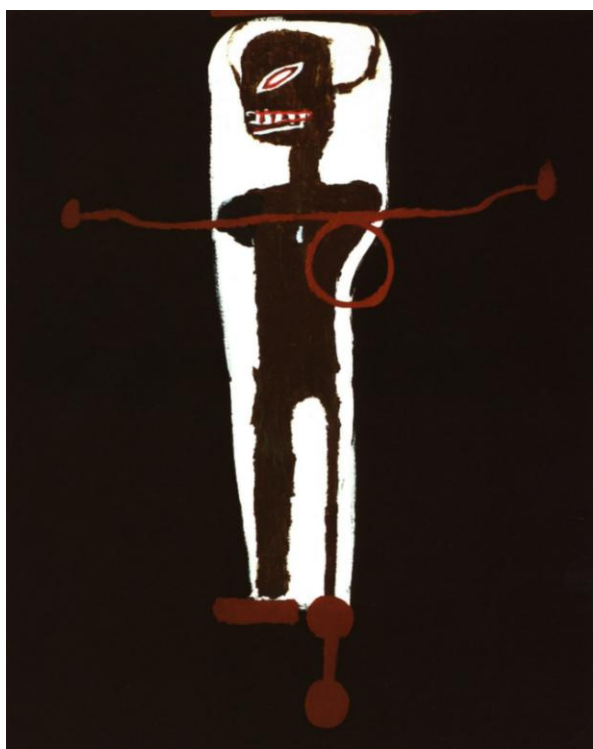


**Pl. 27** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Flexible*, 1984  
 Acrylic and oil paintstick on wood, 259 x 190.5 cm.  
 Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat





**Pl. 28** Jean-Michel Basquiat *Grillo*, 1984  
Acrylic, oil paintstick, paper collage and nails on wood, 4 panels overall 243.8 x 537.2 x 45.7 cm.  
Private collection



**Pl.29** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Gri Gri*, 1986  
Acrylic and oil paintstick on wood, 177.8 x 142.2 cm.  
Private collection



**Pl. 30** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Water Worshipper*, 1984  
Acrylic, oilstick, silkscreen, wood and metal on panel, 210 x 275 cm.  
Private collection



**Pl. 31** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Tenor*, 1985  
Acrylic, oilstick and Xerox collage on canvas, 254 x 289.6 cm.  
Private collection





**Pl. 32** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *To Be Titled*, 1987  
Acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas, 269.9 x 283 cm.  
Galerie Enrico Navarra



**Pl. 33** Robert Del Naja, *King Jean White*, 1989  
Screen print with hand-painted background on paper, 100 x 70 cm.

## Chapter 4

### Self- portraits: cultural identity and the resonance of Basquiat's work in relation to a post-black aesthetic

*'Most of my reviews have been more reviews on my personality; more so than my work... They're just racist.'*

Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1985 <sup>1</sup>

Throughout his career, and certainly after his death, reception of Basquiat's art has been overshadowed by commentary concerning his life; every aspect of his image, identity, heritage and lifestyle have come under scrutiny, perhaps more so than any other modern artist. Clearly, as a young, physically attractive and prodigiously talented man Basquiat's charismatic persona inspired the interest of others including his peers; often photographed and reported on in the media, he became the subject of Warhol's art and Schnabel's venture into film making. However, these representations of the artist are often misleading and negative, causing one to question the intentions of the creators. Within the context of 1980s modernism, still portrayed as a European historic tradition built upon a legacy of imperialism, colonialism and institutionalised racism, the contributions of Black artists were traditionally undervalued and undermined. (In Chapter 2 I observed the way in which the works of artists such as Douglas, Lawrence, Bearden and Lam have been excluded from much extant scholarship on twentieth century art). This systematic exclusion of Black artists from art history cannot be regarded as accidental. Writing on the subject of modernism and intellectual property, art historian Jean Fisher argues that 'African, Asian and Caribbean modernists presented an untenable challenge to a universalist system of values to which... only the white (male) artist could claim legitimate genealogy,'<sup>2</sup> and that this universalism was in fact defined by what it excluded. It is therefore reasonable to argue that within an art historic tradition based on the devaluation and subordination of cultural difference in relation to privileged white (male) positioning, the distorted response to Basquiat's art, which challenged that tradition, was indeed racist. More than any other Black artist before him, Basquiat demanded recognition on equal terms with all other artists, and the content of his work exposed and confronted the inequalities perpetuated in Western post-colonial capitalist society. By focusing on Basquiat's personality the art establishment was, and continues to be, able to ignore his art.

Basquiat has popularly been depicted as a graffiti artist who experienced short lived success in the gallery, a heroin addict who lived fast and died young, whereas this study has shown that Basquiat was an artist whose body of work is based on extensive historical research and sophisticated mastery of technique. In light of the common misconceptions surrounding Basquiat, study of the artist's self-portraits which reveal different aspects of his persona and challenge those stereotypical representations made by others, is illuminating. In this chapter I will analyse some of the many self-portraits created by Basquiat during his lifetime, examining the role of the visual image as an expression of identity with particular reference to the art created by artists racialised as Black. (My purposeful capitalisation of this term throughout the chapter draws attention to the fact that racial labels are ascribed to individuals by society, and acknowledges the way in which, in recent history, the term 'Black' has become associated with political movements that have sought to redress racial inequality). My methodology will draw upon Hall's theory of cultural identity as a formative process, and through my study I will

consider Basquiat's work in relation to a post-black aesthetic and his influence on the work of contemporary artists.

### **Black power**

Much of the subject matter in Basquiat's work is autobiographical; his narrations of diasporic histories recuperate elements of his own cultural heritage, his iconography includes information drawn from the literature and music he studied, and several of his paintings, such as *Untitled (Car Crash)*, 1981 feature key events in his life. One of Basquiat's earliest works which, perhaps somewhat controversially, I situate with his self-portraits is *Untitled (Helmet)*, 1981 (Pl.34). This sculptural piece is one of two works of the same title and features an American football helmet, painted with white acrylic paint. The helmet is decorated at the base with a series of thick, black vertical lines, and on either side with bright blue circular shapes. The crown of the helmet is covered with locks of black hair, presumably the artist's own. Through the combination of physical forms which speak of masculinity, athleticism and black identity, and through the incorporation of a material element of himself in the composition, the work serves to situate the artist in a position of power. Furthermore, Jones argues that through this work Basquiat initiates a dialogue with established artist David Hammons (born 1943) whose politicised art engaged issues relating to American civil rights and the Black Power Movement during the 1970s. Typically working with found objects, Hammons' *Nap Tapestry*, 1978, is woven from African American hair and his Brooklyn based sculpture *Higher Goals*, 1978, featuring a cluster of elongated, bottle-top studded basketball poles symbolises what Jones describes as 'both ghetto exit strategy and unattainable dream of black manhood.'<sup>3</sup> Through this dialogue Basquiat not only asserts his strength in terms of black masculinity, but also early in his career positions himself in relation to other recognised artists – a recurring strategy which will be discussed at length later in this chapter and in Chapter 5.

The painting *Self Portrait*, 1982 (Pl.35) reiterates the way in which Basquiat uses visual representation of self to redress the imbalance of ideological power within the art historical context. Worked in acrylic, oil paintstick and spray paint on canvas the background of this painting is heavily layered: white over grey over black. The muted tones and roughly rectangular shapes of the colour blocks, accentuated with lined black grids suggesting buildings, form an impression of an urban landscape, the artist's favoured background. In the upper part of the canvas, flashes of red and yellow can be seen through the dark black and grey paint. The powerful, multi-directional brushwork creates a sense of energy synonymous with the city. In the foreground Basquiat has depicted himself, in black, silhouetted form, towering over this cityscape. The locks of his hair stand up from his head like a crown, and his facial features, inscribed in white oilstick show fiercely bared teeth. His right hand is overly large, accentuating the power of his creative ability as a painter. His left arm is overly long, and raised; the left hand, a clenched fist enclosed within a circle of power, holding not a paintbrush but an arrow. This arrow, which forms the focal point of the painting, signifies strength and power, symbolising the power of the painter who uses word and image as weapons for change. Within the centre of the canvas a single letter N is inscribed in black oilstick, enclosed within a square. As previous analysis has shown, Basquiat purposefully encloses individual letters in boxes of containment to accentuate their significance. This single letter may signify the American derogatory term ascribed to black citizens, juxtaposed against imagery which visually annihilates ideologies of racism. Historically cast as the dominated, exoticised *Other*,

the black subject represented in Basquiat's *Self Portrait*, 1982 appears as a strong, warrior like figure, exerting dominance over his environment. Cultural critic Greg Tate argues that;

'every creative black intellect derives pleasure from blackness as a realm of both burden and infinite possibility. Out of the pain comes the will to black power, an invitation to join a historic circle of creators, and a mechanism to confront racist forces mounted from birth against your expansion and evolution as an individual.'<sup>4</sup>

In this painting we see the artist's response to that invitation. Throughout his career, Basquiat was steadfast in challenging inherently racist assumptions regarding both his identity and his work. This is exemplified in a filmed interview following the 1982 Fun Gallery exhibition. Journalist Marc H. Miller unwittingly asks Basquiat, 'You're seen as some sort of primal expressionism,' to which Basquiat replies, 'Like an ape? Like a primate?' 'Well, I don't know...' mumbles Miller. 'You said it,' Basquiat responds, 'You said it, man.'<sup>5</sup> Throughout the interview, Basquiat is seen to become increasingly uncomfortable as Miller appears dismissive of what he terms the artist's 'childlike painting'<sup>6</sup> and Miller's clumsy reference to Primitivism is typical of the reception Basquiat's work received during his lifetime - and indicative of art history's general reception of the work of Black artists. However, Basquiat's uncompromising refusal to be stereotyped; his embracing of cultural hybridity, whilst overtly challenging racist ideology is a key motif throughout his work, and is particularly evident in his self-portraits.

Another painting completed during the same year, *Self-Portrait as a Heel, Part Two*, 1982 (Pl.36) shows images of the artist seen from different angles. Central to the composition and set against a bright green background Basquiat has painted a silhouetted image of his head and torso viewed from behind, as if walking away from the Gaze of the viewer. Recognisable by his spiky hair and over-sized coat, the figure holds his hands up, as if in an expression of shock or alarm. Across his back he bears the inscriptions BACK VIEW and COMPOSITE. Outlines of the artist's hands, drawn in blue and white oilstick feature in the top left and bottom right corners of the canvas, again expressing his creativity. In the top right of the canvas is a large representation of the artist's face which dominates the work: his features are clearly defined and he appears with furrowed brow; teeth bared and red rimmed eyes staring directly out from the canvas as if in confrontation. Hebdige describes this composite image as being indicative of Basquiat's reaction to the racism he endured, writing that the self-portrait 'translates the artist's permanent state of self-alienation into concrete visual terms. Basquiat always looked back at himself – as well as us- from the place of the Other.'<sup>7</sup> Hebdige claims that the 'racist implications... attached to Basquiat's adoption by the art world were painfully apparent'<sup>8</sup> from his early reception when his heritage was as much a concern as his art amongst critics. Quoting a line of Basquiat's early graffiti writing:

SAMO© IF THEY SMITE YOU, TURN THE OTHER FACE

Hebdige laments that Basquiat 'turned and turned and turned the other face'<sup>9</sup> throughout his career, and shows this to us in this painting.

Tate has claimed that it is not possible to discuss Basquiat's art without referral to 'white supremacy, (within the art world) and its victimisation of him,' and describes Basquiat's contribution as 'a fight to the death against a white supremacist art world.'<sup>10</sup> Throughout this study I have sought to uphold Basquiat's request made during his lifetime, that he not be labelled a 'Black artist,' but rather *an artist* in the broadest sense,<sup>11</sup> and have argued against

those scholars who seek to contain Basquiat's work within an exclusive African American art historical context, however, it is important to acknowledge the way in which issues of race and racism are central to Basquiat's art. Basquiat was an artist racialised as Black, and the racism he experienced, and observed, undoubtedly affected him – this is expressed within his work. Therefore, whilst diversity is central to Basquiat's themes; a celebration of his multiple inheritances, which defies and crosses boundaries, Basquiat situates blackness at the heart of his aesthetic. Tate describes Basquiat's work as being 'about the conflict and incomprehension that occur when a black subject enters the frame of Western history claiming special rights, special powers, requesting and requiring special acts of dispensation,' and notes that whilst 'the African American struggle for justice in the USA is the history of such declarations (the) history of blacks in Western visual art is not.'<sup>12</sup> Whilst Tate's argument fails to recognise the contributions of artists such as Douglas and Lawrence, it does affirm that quality previously noted in Basquiat's presentation of himself as an artist; that he be recognised on equal terms with other artists in the broadest of art historical contexts. The complexity within Basquiat's art, which expresses an individualised representation of cultural identity whilst at the same time confronting the shared experience of black oppression in Western society, is what makes his work so compelling and progresses previous dialectic concerning issues of racism represented within the context of visual art.

### **Cultural identity**

In the previous chapter I examined Basquiat's exploration of diasporic culture, expressed through the visual representation of the griot, which enabled him to simultaneously explore aspects of his own cultural identity. Basquiat's research of African American and Caribbean history, and representation of this throughout his oeuvre, was closely linked to his own cultural history. As previously argued in Chapter 4 through the recuperation of the image of the griot, Basquiat created a visual *hyperquote*, connecting past and present; ancestry and modernity. In this chapter I intend to examine the way in which Basquiat connects the icon of the griot, and its associated power, to himself through his self-portraiture.

Jones has argued that the inclusion of the black silhouetted head, devoid of detail save for the elliptical eyes characteristic of the griot, within the work *Grillo*, 1984, serves to connect representations of the griot, based on African cultural references, with the mythical grillo, or gri-gri, of diasporic Vodoun religion. Developing this line of thinking, I propose that this image also works to situate the power totems of the grillo within a modern, urban landscape, indicating the presence of ancient ritual within contemporary multicultural society. Furthermore, I suggest that this silhouetted image within *Grillo* might also be viewed as a self-portrait; an example of the artist locating himself within the work, secured on either side by the powerful grillos and Nkisi nail fetish.

This argument is supported by analysis of two self-portraits painted during 1983 which provide a clear visual link between the visual representations of the gri-gri and the artist himself. In *Self Portrait*, 1983 (Pl.37) Basquiat depicts himself in sombre, black silhouette form; the only detail in the mask-like visage being the empty ellipses of the eyes and crown of dreadlocks. In another similar work of the same year *Untitled*, 1983 (Pl.38) the artist again portrays himself in silhouette with the red-rimmed elliptical eyes of the grillo, identifiable by his dreadlocked hair, gap-toothed smile, and the inclusion of his birth date inscribed at the top of the work. The similarity in the silhouetted forms in these works, and those featured in the earlier paintings

*Grillo* and *Gri Gri*, indicate Basquiat's identification with a cultural past represented in the form of the grillo. By painting himself in the style of the gri-gri Basquiat locates himself literally in a position of power.

Despite their simplicity, both these works are visually powerful. Viewed first-hand *Self-Portrait*, 1983 is particularly striking; the thick black paint of the head and shoulders contrasting starkly with the soft ecru of the textured paper on which it is rendered. This paper, with roughly torn edges is stuck onto a papered board adorned with smears of translucent brown adhesive. Whilst the brushwork is controlled, the unworked background appears rough, adding to the overall effect of the painting which challenges assumptions about both the materiality and composition of Western art. In this self-portrait Basquiat reduces his painterly skills to their simplest of forms, and reduces his own image to blackness; confronting the viewer with the racism prevalent in reception of his work. Striving to be seen as an artist in his own right, rather than a 'Black artist' bearing the burden of representation, Basquiat demands that the viewer of this work sees either only blackness, or looks further to see beyond that blackness. In the same way in which Basquiat's depiction of the griot subverts the power of the Gaze; the representation of the 'primitive' object of ritual, transformed within the realm of 'fine art,' looking from the painting with empty eyes, here too the image of the artist destabilises the possession of the viewer – the eyes devoid of colour or detail looking beyond the frame of the painting.<sup>13</sup> With a subtle visual pun Basquiat reminds us of Primitivism's recuperation of the African mask, as he places the Black subject at the centre of the work, and retains absolute control of the image, giving the viewer nothing to connect to. These stark, simple compositions speak powerfully of and to ideologies of racism, as the artist appears to ask the viewer, 'What do you see here?' There are numerous answers to the question.

In his essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*<sup>14</sup> Hall describes forms of cultural practice and representation which have the Black subject at the centre, as raising the question of cultural identity. This question has been a constant issue in relation to Basquiat's art, as various writers have attempted to ascribe cultural identity to the artist. Previous chapters have discussed the insistence of Saggese that Basquiat be considered an African American artist, in contrast to Thompson's argument for a transnational consideration of the artist and his work. Hall describes the problematic nature of this type of ascription of cultural identity, suggesting that as each individual expresses their own ideas, based on their own experience; these individual expressions will never be identical. For Hall identity formation is a matter of *becoming* as much as *being*, belonging as much to the future as to the past. Rather than being something which already exists, eternally fixed within some essentialised historical past, Hall regards cultural identity as a notion which undergoes constant transformation, subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere recovery of the past, waiting to be found, and capable of securing for individuals a sense of self, identities are the names given to the different ways individuals are positioned by, and position themselves, within narratives of the past. Therefore, cultural practices can never represent a shared *accomplished fact* but rather, a unique and individual *production*. This line of thought is particularly relevant to consideration of Basquiat's self-portraiture which shows the artist situating representations of his identification within different contexts.

Hall outlines two different means of defining cultural identity. The first of these describes a shared culture, whereby the individual exists within a group of others who share a common history and ancestry. This definition, which provides a stable frame of meaning and reference

for groups of people, has played a critical role in shaping post-colonial struggles, and has been central to post-colonial creative practice and visual representation, as seen in the work of Harlem Renaissance artists such as Douglas and Lawrence. Basquiat's later representations of diasporic culture also speak of a shared Black Atlantic cultural identity, but go further in engaging an individual retelling of the past, grounded in the production of an individual identity. The second view of cultural identity offered by Hall recognises that together with points of similarity, there are also 'points of deep and significant difference' which render it impossible to speak of 'one experience, one identity.'<sup>15</sup> This second definition is essential to understanding the legacy of colonialism, which ascribes to Black people, and Black experiences, a single false representation based on the ideology of the dominating regimes. This exercising of cultural power was successful in not only positioning Black people as the exoticised *Other* to dominant Western discourse, but also in imposing upon Black subjects an internal belief in that *Otherness*, leading to what Hall describes as a crippling 'expropriation of cultural identity.'<sup>16</sup> This pervasive and flawed ideology also corrupts the understanding of the dominant white subjects: in relation to cultural practice, previous discussion has demonstrated the way in which the exoticising of non-Western cultural histories influenced early Primitivism and 1920s Negritude, for example. Whilst stereotypical attitudes and institutionalised racism persisted within the white dominated art world throughout the twentieth century, the work of artists such as Douglas and Lawrence depicted the shared identification described by Hall. Basquiat's later work extends this aesthetic through an exploration of identification based on similarity and difference, as outlined in Hall's thesis. Throughout his oeuvre Basquiat articulates the unique difference of his own cultural identity, whilst challenging the shared experience of racism within society. In both *Self-Portrait*, 1983 and *Untitled (1960)* 1983 Basquiat celebrates his rich heritage as an American of Caribbean descent, recuperating through subtle imagery a representation of the grillo and its associated mysticism, alluding to diverse linguistic and cultural forms which inform his practice, whilst simultaneously, through this connection, locating his own identity in a position of power and challenging the negativity of racism.

### **De Margin and De Centre**

Writing in 1988 Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer based their essay *De Margin and De Centre*, concerning questions of cultural difference, identity and '*Otherness*,' within 1980s film culture, upon Hall's theories of cultural identity. They examine the diversity of 1980s British cinema which both contradicts and upholds the mythification of a colonial past, and pose the question; in light of the 'deconstruction of structures that determine what is regarded as culturally central... what is regarded as culturally marginal'?<sup>17</sup> Hall's thesis that the rupture created in African history by colonial slavery created a shared diasporic identity, 'constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth'<sup>18</sup> supports Julien and Mercers' rationale and also resonates with Basquiat's recuperation of the griot as discussed in the previous chapter. Moreover, Hall also points out that diasporic identity is essentially based on difference, and outlines the different ways in which diverse marginalised groups have positioned themselves in relation to the centre; politically, culturally and economically. Despite the shared history of slavery and colonisation, this societal difference is for Hall, a key element in the formative production of cultural identity. Therefore, Hall argues, in relation to artistic media, that this diversity, or 'cultural play,' cannot be represented 'as a simple, binary opposition – 'past/present,' 'them/us' (as) its complexity exceeds this binary structure of representation. At

different places, times, in relation to different questions, the boundaries are re-sited.’<sup>19</sup> This notion of difference is central to understanding Basquiat’s work.

Basquiat, who as previously noted, considered black people to be ‘never portrayed realistically, or at all in the history of modern art’<sup>20</sup> confronts traditional binaries in several works where he paints himself alongside others. As previously demonstrated whilst the Black subject has often been omitted from or cast as a subservient figure within historical artistic traditions, Basquiat’s self-portraits depict the artist in positions of power. In the painting *Dos Cabezas*, 1982 (Pl. 39) which depicts the artist alongside Andy Warhol, we see an example of Basquiat positioning *de margin and de centre*. The painting was hastily created by Basquiat, as a gift for Warhol, whom he greatly admired, upon their initial meeting.<sup>21</sup> Although Basquiat was still an emerging artist at the time, he situates himself within the composition on equal terms with Warhol, depicting both artists’ heads side by side and of equal size, symbolising his view of their creative equality - though painting his own image in more dominant tones and slightly in the forefront of the work. The work was presented to Warhol as a token of friendship and respect, and this is accentuated by the use of Spanish language for the title; translated literally as *two heads*, or two creative minds. Within the inclusive use of his mother tongue, the language of family, Basquiat extends friendship to Warhol on equal terms, and at the same time secures his claim to inclusion in the modernist tradition.

Basquiat was to go on to work with Warhol between the years 1983 – 1985. This painting provides a marked contrast to publicity photographs of the two artists, used to promote the 1985 exhibition of their collaborative works at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York (Appendix 1 Fig. 6). The exhibition poster includes two photographs in which the artists appear dressed as boxers. In the first they stand side by side, holding up their hands in boxing gloves; Warhol appears dressed in white t-shirt and Basquiat, bare-chested, in Everlast boxing shorts. Saggese notes the way in which the image invites comparisons between the two: one old, one young; one white, one black. In the second photograph Basquiat poses as if knocked out by a fatal uppercut to the jaw delivered by Warhol. Although the conceptual idea for the posters was Shafrazi’s, photographer, Michael Halsband, describes this second image as being Basquiat’s idea, and it is easy to imagine the artist, who had been a keen fan of boxing from an early age, and featured boxers in several of his paintings, enjoying playing the part of one of his heroes, perhaps ironically. However, Saggese points out that the ‘manipulation of the image has racial overtones,’ and notes the ‘clear correspondence between the commodification of black bodies via entertainment and sports, and that experienced by the artist in the overhyped contemporary art market of 1980s New York’<sup>22</sup>. There are further imperialistic overtones to be seen in Lizzie Himmel’s 1985 publicity shots of the two artists, showing Warhol seated majestically on a chair draped with a tiger skin, beneath a bust of Socrates, with Basquiat standing behind the chair looking up innocently towards the camera (Appendix 1 Fig. 7). Basquiat, who was always quick to challenge racism, would surely have been sensitive to the racial connotations in these photographs which provide an insight into societal attitudes of institutionalised racism, may well have been a cynical and knowing participant in their staging; once again presenting the viewer with images which initiate interrogation of the subtle power dynamics present within a society founded upon colonial racism. Contemporary representations of black masculinity have generally focused on the black male subject stereotyped as sports figure, jazzman or gangster; constructions which Basquiat explored within his art. Much has been written of the artist’s admiration for black heroes from the



worlds of sport and jazz, expressed in his paintings, but a more nuanced consideration of Basquiat's artistic intentions might suggest that he forefronts these figures in his work in order to demonstrate the oversimplified caricature of black masculinity presented within popular culture.

The implicit racism inherent within these photographs can be compared to the ways in which Basquiat was portrayed by his peers: Schnabel's misleading biopic *Basquiat*, 1989 created one year after Basquiat's death, which depicts the artist as a weak, ineffectual figure, lacking knowledge and culture, who paints instinctively, and exists as a foil for the more sophisticated artists Schnabel and Warhol;<sup>23</sup> or Warhol's 1984 silkscreen work, *Portrait of Jean-Michel as David* (Pl.40) which depicts Basquiat as Michelangelo's David, wearing only a white jockstrap and standing in the classical Renaissance posture of the marble statue. Warhol's image reveals the way in which he was captivated, not only by Basquiat's talent as an artist, but also by his physical beauty. The work was recently sold in 2014 by Sotheby's whose auction catalogue describes Warhol's practice in creating the image in 1983:

'Warhol captured Jean-Michel in a series of revealing Polaroids... each of Warhol's snapshots of Basquiat zooms in on a particular section of the artist's figure. To create the silkscreen template (he) stacked the square images against one another like the building blocks of a puzzle, resulting in the fragmentary and disjunctive figure seen duplicated in the present work. Warhol pays particular attention to Basquiat's hands, here multiplied in various gestural motions, a nod to Warhol's admiration for the painter's dexterity and innate talent as draftsman.'<sup>24</sup>

This interpretation highlights the positive aspects of the image; however Warhol's portrait might also be viewed as perpetuating the domination of (white) Western art history over the representation of the Black subject. By shattering Basquiat's figure into fragmentary, disjunctive parts, Warhol exerts control over the image of the subject, and this fragmentation suggests weakness; the character displayed is not whole but dissected into mere body parts.<sup>25</sup> (A second similarly titled piece by Warhol features the photographic fragments arranged in a random, chaotic manner further suggestive of brokenness). In this way the image perpetuates the commodification and fetishisation of the Black male body. Although Warhol admired Basquiat, his depiction reveals entrenched attitudes of patriarchal colonisation. This objectification, prevalent throughout Western popular culture, is exemplified most obviously within an art historical context in the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe (1946 – 1989) whose controversial racist and sexist photographs of the Black male body which perpetuate the subjugation of Black masculinity were highly popular during the 1980s.

In her curation of the 1994 exhibition *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in American Art*, Thelma Golden examined the social constructions which have been used throughout history to confine and control the Black male; physically, socially and politically. Writing in the preface to the exhibition catalogue scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes the way in which these stereotypes, initially inherent within the dominating ideology used to rationalise colonial slavery, have perpetuated;

'The black male... has been represented in Western culture as the central enigma of a humanity wrapped in the darkest and deepest subliminal fantasies of Europe and America's collective cultural id. And, tragically, every African-American male who walks

down any street in America carries with him the hidden heritage of this negative cultural and psychological legacy.’<sup>26</sup>

The exhibition featured a number of artists whose work questions and challenges such stereotypical representations, including Basquiat, who carried this hidden heritage or burden of the preconceived with him. Whilst Basquiat clearly fascinated those around him, and both Schnabel’s film and Warhol’s portrait were to a degree, inspired by the charisma of the young artist, these art forms have contributed to the stereotypical representation of Basquiat and have had an adverse effect on reception of his work.<sup>27</sup>

### **The artist as icon**

Throughout his career Basquiat courted publicity, whilst being sensitive to the reactions of others, and often expressing dissatisfaction with the way in which he was portrayed by critics and the media. The global modern art boom of the 1980s, into which Basquiat launched his career marked the beginning of a period in art history during which more works of art were to be created, displayed, bought and sold than ever before, characterised by a closer relationship between fine art and mainstream popular culture, together with a growth in the celebrity status of the artist. Warhol’s 1960s creation of the artist as an entrepreneurial brand was to reach maturity amongst the YBAs of the 1990s,<sup>28</sup> and during the 1980s financial prosperity led to an increase in career motivated artists, willing to engage in the commercial prosperity associated with artistic success. Like many of his peers, Basquiat was quick to engage the art of self promotion to further his career. From his early creation of the SAMO character, and appearances on Glenn O’Brien’s *TV Party*<sup>29</sup> Basquiat purposefully constructed a public identity which was bohemian and intellectual.

Basquiat’s construction of an image reflecting elements of both the avant-garde and the excess of 1980s capitalist success is evident in the way he is portrayed in a photograph on the cover of a 1982 copy of the New York Times magazine; barefoot and casually attired in one of the many Armani suits he wore when painting, holding his paintbrush in the manner of a cigarette, whilst glowering at the camera. The contrast of the artist’s unconventional dreadlocked hair and bare feet with his expensive designer suit articulates a play on traditional mores characteristic of Basquiat (Appendix 1 Fig. 8). In other photographic portraits Basquiat chose to hold African artefacts or copies of books by Kerouac and Burroughs. Basquiat was both image and fashion conscious and often appeared formally dressed at a time when fashion dictated a more casual and flamboyant approach.<sup>30</sup> The artist who had inherited his love of jazz from his conservative father Gérard, also appropriated the smart ‘*preppie meets boho*’ style favoured by early 1960s jazz musicians such as Miles Davis. This style choice is revealing. The jazz scene of this era attracted a racially mixed audience made up of liberal Americans supportive of Black civil rights, very much a minority in early 1960s society. Critic Sean O’Hagan describes the period as being ‘a brief utopian moment amidst the gathering storms of protest,’ and notes ‘jazz music was the catalyst for change... It was universal. People came for the music, whatever their age, beliefs or skin colour. The music united people.’<sup>31</sup> This ethos of cosmopolitanism centred around universal equality is inherent within Basquiat’s work and this associated style of dress is illustrated in the painting *Self-Portrait with Tie*, 1985 (Pl. 41). Painted by Basquiat at the St. Moritz home of his dealer Bruno Bischofberger, the stylistic detail within the composition make it unusual amongst Basquiat’s oeuvre, and it is one of the few paintings the artist created in oils on canvas. For Basquiat, constantly confronted by racist

stereotyping, the construction of an image, or visual identity, which negated the ideas others had of him was important. As Suzanne Mallouk recalls, 'He would play with these black stereotypes and present himself in the form of threatening black stereotypes... to be subversive, to make people stare at their own racism in the face.'<sup>32</sup>

In *Self-Portrait with Tie* Basquiat uses clothing as a visual tool to subvert dominant notions of identity. Here we see the Black man not as merely a physical form; an athlete, or a body to be desired, but as an intellectual being. The overall composition of the painting is vibrant as the artist situates himself against a background of layered green, black, blue and white interspersed with black diagonal lines which provide a sense of movement, and orange, red and white abstract forms; thunderbolts or balls of flame, on the left and lower right side of the canvas, behind the figure's head, and above his shoulder. A thickly inscribed black arrow in the foreground of the work points upward to the top right of the painting contributing to the overall dynamic of the composition and suggesting forward movement or progression: this figure is forward thinking. The self portrait shows the head and torso of the artist, who appears smartly dressed in a white shirt with a red, regimental tie and a black jacket. His facial features outlined in white and green, show a broadly smiling mouth contrasted with a furrowed brow and red rimmed dark eyes, which as in the previously discussed work *Self Portrait as a Heel, Part Two*, 1982 indicate his deep thought and toil over the canvas.

The notion of the creation of visual image in relation to the physical representation of an identity is an interesting one which bears closer examination. In Basquiat's early SAMO© graffiti there existed a performative quality to his work: in the artist's creation of the mysterious character of SAMO© and subsequent revealing of himself as Mr. SAMO© on cable television; and in his loosely biographical performance as the young graffiti writer Jean in the film *Downtown 81*.<sup>33</sup> Basquiat's image at this time was striking; dressed in vintage boiler suit and over-sized thrift store overcoat, with his head shaved into a Mohawk of bleached dreadlocks. As SAMO© Basquiat was performing an artistic identity; creating the artist he was to become - uncompromising and demanding of respect. This performative quality is also evident in Basquiat's self portraits and in the way he later presented himself as an artist. Basquiat, who studied art through his observations and intense reading, would no doubt have learned from observing Warhol how to 'create' an artistic presence.

In her examination of the strategies of representation feminist writer Pratibha Parma notes the way in which visual representation is associated with questions of race, and that much of the practice of Black artists has been concerned with deconstructing power relations in dominant visual representations which, as previously noted, traditionally position Black subjects in an unequal position in relation to white society.<sup>34</sup> In Basquiat's self portraits the artist subverts this traditional power relationship; challenging orthodoxies in works such as *Self-Portrait with Tie*, 1983, or exposing stereotypes in works including *Hollywood Africans*, 1983 which is discussed later in this chapter.

The painting *Self-Portrait with Tie* encourages comparison with photographs taken of Basquiat by photographer James Van Der Zee, known for his documentation of the Harlem Renaissance, in 1982 and by Thompson in 1984 (Appendix 1 Fig.3). In both this painting and these photographs Basquiat's choice of formal attire indicate his intention to rework issues of identity in relation to himself as a Black man and as an artist.<sup>35</sup> Parmar argues that the

controlling of the production of images of self is an important self-conscious strategy for Black image makers, in order to redress historic unequal systems of representation. She writes;

‘Images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individuals and marginalised groups have access. The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves.’<sup>36</sup>

More recent examples of this strategy relating to the redress of unequal representation can be seen in the work of American artist Kehinde Wiley (born 1977) whose paintings in the style of traditional nineteenth century European portraiture feature images of African Americans dressed in expensive modern sports clothing (synonymous with urban prosperity). By disrupting the aesthetic of the Old Masters, and situating modern Black men and women outside of a historical narrative revolving around colonial slavery, Wiley challenges traditional values relating to racial politics. Like Basquiat, Wiley’s paintings depict the Black subject as a strong, heroic figure. Basquiat’s work shows that the artist clearly understood the relationship between image and the power to control and define social power: his representations of ‘self’ involved the purposeful construction of an identity operating as an empowering means of reclamation and self-definition.

### **The stereotypical grotesque as a form of challenge**

Analysis of Basquiat’s self-portraits illustrate the nuanced and sophisticated ways in which he used visual representation to challenge racist attitudes; either overtly or subtly. He further developed the political expression of Black artists who had preceded him, and I would argue, was innovative in engaging what Mercer terms ‘the stereotypical grotesque’ as a form of challenge, which would later be further developed by others artists after him.<sup>37</sup> In the painting *Hollywood Africans*, 1983 (Pl.42) Basquiat presents to the viewer elements of the stereotypical identity ascribed to African Americans in order to confront and challenge those stereotypes. The work features a self portrait of the artist, together with portraits of his New York friends Toxic and Rammellzee, who were amongst a larger group of associates Basquiat flew out to Los Angeles in 1982 and again in 1983.

The background of this large, square canvas is a bright yellow acrylic wash, layered over black with a patch of turquoise in the bottom right of the painting. Over this yellow ground the work is heavily inscribed with image and text drawn in multi-coloured oilstick. In the left foreground Basquiat has drawn himself; chin in hand as if pondering the complexity of the subject matter within the composition. To the right of the self portrait the artist identifies himself with the inscription HERO.ISM, reference to his date of birth 22.60/12 and to another work created during the same year SELF PORTRAIT AS A HEEL #3. To his left are drawings of Toxic and Rammellzee, identifiable by their facial features and the labels TOXIC, RMLZ and ZEE above and below their heads. At the top of the canvas is inscribed the title of the piece:

HOLLYWOOD AFRICANS 1940 –  
HOLLYWOOD AFRICANS©  
HOLLYWOOD AFRICANS

This caption is repeated in the lower half of the canvas; together with the slogan HOLLYWOOD AFRICANS FROM THE NINETEEN FORTIES – Basquiat is clearly making sure the viewer is aware of the theme of the work. This title contains a dual meaning, referring to the obvious displacement of the three New Yorkers in California; it also makes ironic reference to the way in which the Hollywood film industry has portrayed African Americans over time.

The detailed inscription within the work references the commercial aspects of the film industry and the commodification and exploitation of black people. Beside a starburst containing the word NEW, the term HOLLYWOOD AFRICANS © is the word POPCORN drawing the viewers attention to the financial gain associated with the marketing of this exploitation, and this is accentuated by the repeated inclusion of the phrase 22 YEN and the words SUGAR CANE, TOBACCO and TAX FREE. In the top right of the canvas is a drawing of an Oscar award statue and the phrase MOVIE STAR FOOTPRINTS. These together with the date included in the title, allude to actress Hattie McDaniel becoming the first black woman to receive an Oscar in 1940. Ironically, her nomination for Best Supporting Role was for her part in the film *Gone with the Wind*, in which she played the subservient character *Mammy*.

Basquiat further references the role of Hollywood in perpetuating racist stereotyping with the question WHAT IS BWANA? 'Bwana,' a Swahili form of polite address, was commonly used in American film scripts by black actors cast in subordinate roles, addressing white men. Saggese cites examples of films such as *Son of Tarzan*, 1915, *Bwana Devil*, 1953, and *Call Me Bwana*, 1963 which all 'reinforce the myth of the dark, primitive and the savage African continent.'<sup>38</sup>

In his study of Basquiat's influence on hip-hop culture, Sirmans argues that through the incorporation of ideas from music, a temporal art form, into his paintings, characterised by a concentration on the visual image of words, Basquiat successfully located historical issues within contemporary dialectic. In other words, Basquiat situated historic intellectual concerns within the common consciousness of the present. Sirmans describes the uncompromising nature of Basquiat's use of the written word within his art arguing that, 'Basquiat's poetics were always political and unabashedly direct in their commentary on colonialism, racism and class warfare,'<sup>39</sup> and this is evident here. Against the black colour wash at the foot of the canvas Basquiat inscribes in luminous pink oilstick 200 YEN II crowned with his signature emblem, as if signing and naming the price of the work.<sup>40</sup> Beside this emblem, writ large in white is the word GANGSTERISM. With this single word Basquiat connects the historic racism within the Hollywood film industry of the 1940s to modern day racism in Western society which commonly, and incorrectly, ascribes an assumed collective identity to the Black male.

This work was exhibited at a solo exhibition which opened in March 1983 at Larry Gagosian's Gallery in Los Angeles, together with another related work entitled *Hollywood Africans in Front of the Chinese Theater with Footprints of Movie Stars*, 1983 (Pl. 43). This similarly themed painting also depicts Basquiat with Toxic and Rammellzee, and references Charlie Parker's daughter Pree, 1951 – '53. In this work Basquiat draws the viewer's attention to his characteristic play with the written word; replacing the visual image of the mouth in his self portrait with the printed word TEETH. It is interesting to note here that the name PREE accentuated within a rectangular box is a word featuring in Jamaican patois, meaning 'to watch.' This double meaning is relevant here in relation to the subject matter, drawing attention to the way in which Black subjects have been portrayed, and observed, in cinematic history, and the power of this influence upon public perception.

In his inquiry into the social and cultural circumstances in which contemporary representations of black masculinity are produced in popular culture, sociologist Herman Gray sets out to disrupt the constructed ways in which these representations are seen and understood. Observing the way in which self-representations of Black masculinity in the United States have been historically structured by and against the dominant, and dominating, dialectic of white masculinity, Gray notes the example of the 1950s Black jazz men as being 'particularly emblematic.' Through their innovative musical aesthetic, sense of style and cultural discourse, these men challenged dominant assumptions regarding Black masculinity. Through their art, they:

'defined themselves in a racist social order (and) articulated a different way of knowing (them)selves... (They) enacted a black masculine that not only challenged whiteness but exiled it to the (cultural) margins of blackness – i.e. in their hands blackness was a powerful symbol of the masculine.'<sup>41</sup>

Gray recognises the contradictions within this alternative sign of Black masculinity, as the Black jazz man was not only celebrated, but criminalised by white society who regarded him as a social threat challenging the role allocated to him in the dominant social order, and exoticised as the 'modern primitive,' expressing a masculinity that rejected societal norms. The jazz man's 'cool pose of disengagement (was) a part of the style, personality, vision and practice of an assertive heterosexual black masculinity that could not be confined within the dominant cultural logic.'<sup>42</sup> This same cool pose of disengagement, and complexity, was evident in the identity created by Basquiat, who greatly admired and referenced the 1950s Jazz man, particularly Charlie Parker, throughout his body of work. Basquiat strove to emulate the socio-political discourse and aesthetic created by the jazzman, and also to a degree, re-enacted the mores of his heroes. Gray discusses the way in which, whilst the jazz man challenged dominant white discourses of masculinity, the negative behaviours characteristic of this icon; use of drugs, sexism and nihilism, simultaneously maintained unequal structures of power in relation to gender. These same problematic patterns can be seen today in constructs of the Black male as '*original gangsta*.'<sup>43</sup>

In these paintings Basquiat's powerful commentary successfully engages the stereotypical grotesque, raising questions concerning popular constructs of Black masculinity which further highlight Hall's theory of a diasporic identity based upon diversity and difference, and defined by a 'recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a concept of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity.'<sup>44</sup>

### **Towards a Post-black aesthetic**

Contemporary British artist Chris Ofili (born 1968) who acknowledges the influence of Basquiat's legacy to his own practice has further developed the discourse of Black figuration foregrounded by Basquiat in his own work. However, unlike Basquiat, who only rarely employs the 'stereotypical grotesque,' most frequently portraying both himself and his black heroes heroically, Ofili's work frequently engages issues of representation through parody. Like Basquiat, as a young artist Ofili noted that 'There was no-one else painting black people or black life,'<sup>45</sup> and set out to incorporate an urban Black British experience into his art. Tate curator Judith Nesbitt describes Ofili's early works, many of them self-portraits, as

Expressionistic in style and showing his indebtedness to Basquiat. She argues that to 'viewers versed in cultural theories of representation and the identity politics of so much art of the 1980s, Ofili's self-portraits read as statements about visibility and blackness.'<sup>46</sup> Clearly, Ofili's work continues the dialectic running throughout Basquiat's oeuvre. Working in the 1990s, a decade later than Basquiat and on the other side of the Atlantic, Ofili is further empowered to explore attitudes to ethnicity outside of the constraints of academic theorisations of blackness or racial politics, explaining in interview; 'My project is not a PC project. That's my direct link to blaxploitation. I'm trying to make things you can laugh at. It allows you to laugh at issues that are potentially serious.'<sup>47</sup> Whereas Basquiat points subtly to the Black GANGSTERISM in *Hollywood Africans*, 1983 posing an intellectual question for the viewer to consider, Ofili overtly plunders 1970s blaxploitation films and television shows, music and media for the subjects of his work.<sup>48</sup> One of a series of paintings featuring the caricature *Captain Shit*, the painting *The Adoration of Captain Shit and the Legend of the Black Stars*, 1998 (Pl.44) draws upon Marvel comic heroes, the film character *Shaft* and 1970s soul singers in creation of the painting's subject. In this work Ofili references the way in which Black culture is consumed by a white audience, as he depicts super-star *Captain Shit* mobbed by adoring white admirers. The parody within the painting is presented to the typically overwhelmingly white audience of the art gallery and is mounted on supports made of animal dung, ironically posing the question, *who is subjugating who?*

Not all of Ofili's art centres around parody and in the same way in which Basquiat's work, particularly his self-portraits, build upon the earlier work of Lawrence in locating the Black subject at the heart of the painting, not as stereotypical caricature or politicised emblem, but purely as the focal point of the narrative, Ofili also develops this legacy. Writing on the subject of Ofili's *Within Reach* exhibit at the 50<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, Enwezor describes the way in which, within the context of Western modernism wherein 'the presence of black subjectivity (is) anathema to modern conceptions of identity' and the black subject is eternally cast as 'the lugubrious Caliban,' Ofili's work 'dismantles imperial memory, in order to 'shift its horizon... towards the line of transnational African and diasporic imagination.'<sup>49</sup>

This description might equally be applied to analysis of Basquiat's earlier work which engages a 'reinvention of the black subject, literally and historically, on its own terms within the tradition of painting,' and thus situates blackness 'within the canon of European art.'<sup>50</sup> As previously discussed this re-invention or repositioning of the black subject, outside of the stereotypical boundaries of imperial or colonial memory lies at the heart of Basquiat's work, and the work of other earlier black artists such as Lawrence. Describing the way in which this historic dialogue; re-positioning and re-presenting the subject in order to question and challenge the viewer, has influenced his own work, Ofili has noted; 'There were great artists who have made work in relation to that idea – Basquiat being an obvious one.'<sup>51</sup>

Ofili's painting *No Woman No Cry*, 1998 (Pl.45) is reminiscent of Basquiat's earlier work *The Death of Michael Stewart*, 1983 as both artists manipulate aesthetic representation to evoke a human response to racism. Ofili's painting, inspired by the enquiry into the murder of British teenager Stephen Lawrence in 1993, depicts the grief, dignity and strength of the boy's mother, Doreen Lawrence, notable throughout media coverage of the case. The work demonstrates the use of artistic representation to open a dialectical space between that representation and cultural discourse. Both Basquiat and Ofili, whilst choosing not to be

defined or categorised by issues of race, foreground a new Black figurative style which challenges previous notions of race and culture.

Basquiat's self-portraits mark a significant landmark in this re-invention, or repositioning of the Black subject, within art history which is particularly evident in paintings such as *Self-Portrait with Tie*, 1985 that does not overtly present a visual intellectual challenge to stereotypical boundaries but serves to interrogate traditional preconceptions in a subtle manner. Works like this, and Ofili's later works can be located within the post-black aesthetic defined by Golden and Ligon in 1994, describing art created by a post-civil rights generation of Black artists who, whilst remaining informed by historical references, recognised diversity within Black experience and identity, and sought freedom to exist without labelling. Golden and Ligon's concept, influenced in part by artist Raymond Saunders' essay '*Black Is a Color*,'<sup>52</sup> was outlined in the catalogue for the 2001 exhibition *Freestyle* at the Harlem Studio Museum. Not intended to describe an art movement, or an exclusive group of artists, Golden describes the concept as a means of describing a new generation of artists who felt free to disengage with a historical Black art history, defined in terms of struggle, and standing against the predominant art historical canon, and were looking ahead to define themselves and their work in new and different ways. Artists who were all 'adamant about not being labelled as 'black artists,' though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.'<sup>53</sup> Golden did not specifically include Basquiat amongst those artists defined as characterising a 'post-black' aesthetic, although she described the work of emerging post-black artists as being informed by multiculturalism and the generation of artists who had preceded them in the 1980s. I would argue that Basquiat was without doubt a forerunner of this new generation of artists. This view is supported to a degree by Saggese who questions whether Basquiat should be included in discussions of a post-black aesthetic and points out that 'Basquiat's work exemplifies the complexity of blackness and black experience'<sup>54</sup> and notes that whilst his paintings were focused on American culture, they also embraced European and African diaspora issues.

Art historian Cathy Byrd argues that Golden did not 'invent' the post-black concept (Golden in fact, credits Ligon with the original idea) and claims that the genre existed in part since Black artists such as Bearden, Lawrence and Lewis - artists whose work was not intrinsically linked with their ethnicity, began creating non-objective art.<sup>55</sup> Clearly, there exists a certain degree of controversy associated to Golden and Ligon's concept, and I would uphold Bird's stance whilst also acknowledging the value of Golden's articulation of what defines a post-black aesthetic. In a 2009 talk at Tate Modern, Golden outlined her original thinking; describing how, in an attempt to understand the notion and politics of difference, moving away from the monolithic and homogenous in the interests of diversity, she recognised the way in which difference might be explored and expressed through a multitude of vantage points – the term post-black describing those artists who would think about and interpret difference in these ways.<sup>56</sup> This definition is particularly useful in dismantling previous structures which limited and confined the work of artists racialised as Black within the boundaries of 'Black art.'

### **Beyond boundaries**

It is in concurrence with this line of thinking, which resonates with Hall's thesis, that I engage the term post-black to describe Basquiat's aesthetic. Analyses of Basquiat's self-portraits demonstrate the way the artist defined himself in new and complex ways within the context of



his artwork. One such example is the painting *Boy and Dog in a Johnnypump*, 1982 (Pl. 46); a glorious self-portrait in which the subject exists outside of notions of difference. Surely based upon childhood memories of a summer day, playing in the water of a New York sidewalk fire hydrant, this vibrant painting is full of light and colour which create a sense of joyful exuberance. The background is rendered in bright sunny shades of yellow, orange and red, with soft green tones suggesting grass and foliage within the landscape, and bluish grey splodges of colour representing the water splashing up from the hydrant. Central to the composition the figure of the artist as a boy is characterised by his dreadlocked hair, and features the exposed internal organs typical of Basquiat's work, which suggest the fragile nature of human existence. This human fragility would have been of particular significance to Basquiat who was injured by a car whilst playing on the street as a child, and lost his spleen as a result of the accident. Outlined in red, the viewer sees the boy, as if with the sun behind him, standing smiling, with arms open wide and fingers outstretched. Drips of black and blue paint which the artist has allowed to run from the arms and hands of the figure suggest the water trickling through his fingers as he plays. To the left of the canvas is a black dog which appears as if submerged in the water, his head, eyes and teeth outlined in white spray paint. A red splodge of colour on the dog's back accentuates the movement in his upright tail. Overall, the vibrant colours in the painting contribute to the playful nature of the scene and remind the viewer of the artist's painterly dexterity; his ability to create atmosphere and energy through purposeful use of colour and multi-directional brushwork. As a self-portrait the work demonstrates Basquiat's self-reflexivity, as he uses this medium in order to position himself as a painter within the history of modern art.

In his study of the way in which different artists have approached blackness as a device in representation within the context of visual art, Enwezor has defined two distinct ways of working that I apply to the work of Basquiat.<sup>57</sup> The first of these devices involves the work of art opening up a discourse around the public appearance of the Black subject engendered by the negativity of racism. This way of working can be seen in Basquiat's use of subtle visual parody in *Hollywood Africans*, 1983 and Ofili's extreme development of this device in the *Captain Shit* paintings - this theme runs through much of Ofili's early work and is further expanded upon by artists such as Kara Walker (born 1969) whose silhouetted murals depict a grotesque caricature of plantation slavery.<sup>58</sup> Through the medium of self-portraiture, as in other areas of his painting, Basquiat engages nuanced and sophisticated devices with which to expose and confront traditional racist assumptions. He does this through the visual construction of nonconformist identities; the positioning of self in relation to others, and the subtle use of inscription as a means by which to engage the stereotypical grotesque. It is this complex dialogue contained within Basquiat's work which foregrounds the explicit challenging of racist ideology seen in the work of these later artists.

The second device identified by Enwezor addresses problems of social visibility, as the Black subject is rendered invisible due to negation within historic cultural representation.<sup>59</sup> Through the medium of self-portraiture Basquiat is successful in challenging this historical invisibility, as he repeatedly paints himself into the picture, into the gallery, and into art history in paintings which exist in time and space, outside of the constraints of social or racial political discourse. This is what Basquiat achieves in paintings such as *Boy and Dog in a Johnnypump*, 1982 as he extends the visual narrative opened up by Bearden and Lawrence. Similar movements towards work focused upon situation of the Black subject in paintings devoid of overt political

overtones, but focused on exploration of form and colour can be seen in the recent working practice of Ofili as his body of work builds upon Basquiat's legacy.<sup>60</sup>

This aspect of Basquiat's art is important in defining his legacy in terms of influence on the work of contemporary artists, particularly those from minority groups. Whereas it is common for artists from under-represented groups to produce work which conforms to the first of Enwezor's models - in the case of Black artists, political art that presents the subject engendered by racism – it has been less common for Black artists to successfully address the problem of historic invisibility in historic cultural representation. As previously discussed, this was the focus of artists such as Lawrence and Bearden, but because their work has been largely overlooked, they did not succeed in positioning the Black subject within the Modernist canon. Basquiat is the first Black artist to achieve this, and this is further highlighted in one of his later paintings, *Self-Portrait*, 1986, (Pl. 47) in which the artist paints himself at work. Against a background of layered white, green and yellow tones which suggest the interior of the artist's studio, Basquiat has depicted himself in the centre of the canvas. In the upper right of the composition can be seen a brown rectangular shape and a black painting, both of which appear as if hanging upon the studio wall. The green floor of the studio leads the eye from the foreground to middle distance of the scene. To the left of the painting a block of vivid red colour suggests the canvas the artist is working on, and on the far left, partially obscured by layers of white acrylic is the blue and black outline of an image similar to the icon of the griot, which appears to be contained within the canvas of the artist. The subject of the self-portrait appears standing upright, slender and muscular, with legs planted wide and arms outstretched. In both fists he holds what appear to be paintbrushes, and his gaze is fixed upon the object of his creation. His hair springs up wildly from his skull denoting creative energy and his brow appears reddened, his mouth open, as if in effort. In a style reminiscent of the paired self-portraits painted in 1983, the subject is painted in black silhouette form with elliptical shaped, unseeing eyes, one of which is outlined in white, the other in black with a golden partially lowered lid. The rendition of the subject and the reference to the icon of the griot within the depiction of the artist's canvas again invoke the totemic power of the talismanic grillo. Each of these contributing elements combine to produce an image representative of great strength and mastery, in which the Basquiat depicts himself as a powerful creative force.

In 1983 Basquiat told Geldzhaler that at least eighty per cent of his work was about anger.<sup>61</sup> The anger that he expressed concerning the way in which his work was reviewed, and the overwhelming focus upon his personal identity, which he considered to be racist, Basquiat addressed through a body of self-portraits which challenge, and move beyond, stereotypical imagery. Basquiat's representations of his identity; in terms of masculinity, cultural heritage, spirituality and creative intelligence demonstrate his sensitivity to identity as a formative process. It is this understanding, reflected in his work, which enables Basquiat to extend his aesthetic beyond limiting categorisation. Through his self-portraiture Basquiat successfully situated himself within his own paintings as a figure of strength and in doing so located his work securely within art history on his own terms.



**Pl.34** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled (Helmet)*, 1981  
Hair and acrylic on football helmet, 23 x 20.5 x 33cm.  
Mugrabi collection



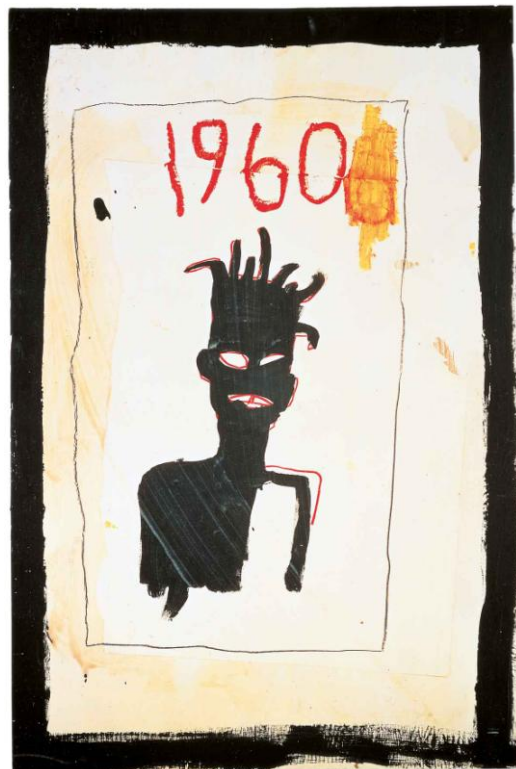
**Pl. 35** Jean-Michel Basquiat *Self-Portrait*, 1982  
Acrylic and oil paint stick on linen, 193 x 239 cm.  
Private collection



**Pl. 36** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Self-Portrait as a Heel. Part Two*, 1982  
Acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas, 243.8 x 156.2 cm.  
Private collection



**Pl. 37** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Self-Portrait*, 1983  
Acrylic on board 91.5 x 61 cm  
Private collection

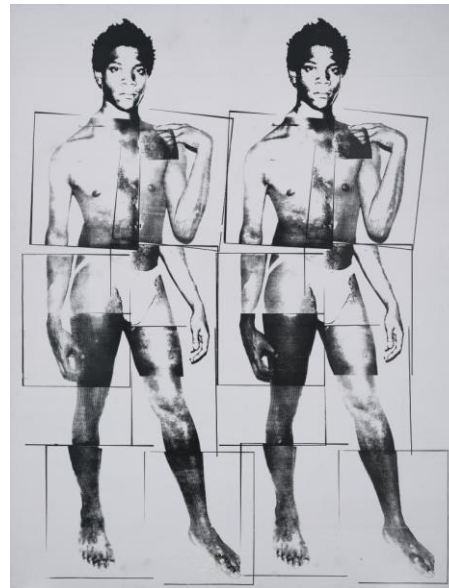


**Pl. 38** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled (60)*, 1983  
Acrylic & oil paintstick on paper, mounted on wood  
91.4 x 61 cm. Robert Miller Gallery





**Pl. 39** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Dos Cabezas*, 1982  
Acrylic and oilstick on canvas mounted on wooden supports, 154 x 155 cm. Private collection.



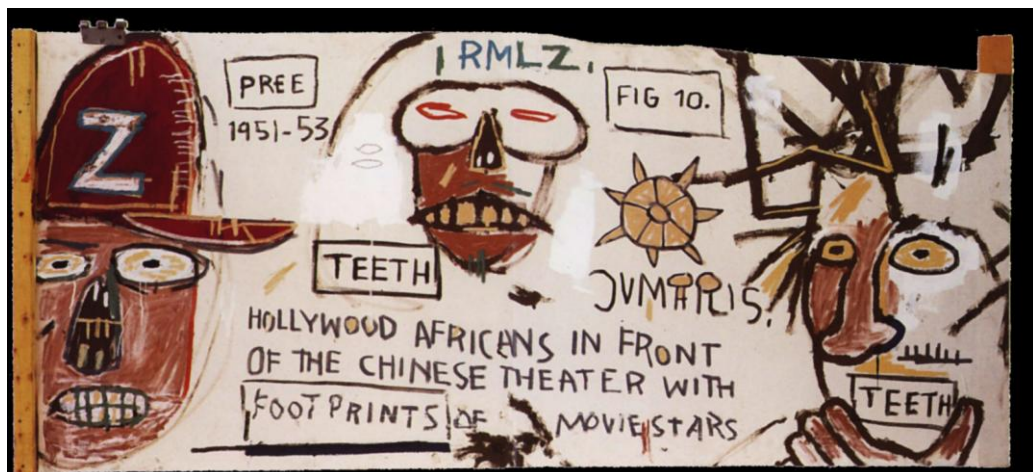
**Pl. 40** Andy Warhol, *Portrait of Jean-Michel as David*, 1984  
Acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas, 228.6 x 176.5 cm. Private collection



**Pl. 41** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Self-Portrait with Tie*, 1985  
Oil on canvas, 86 x 56 cm. Private collection



**Pl. 42** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Hollywood Africans*, 1983  
Acrylic and oilstick on canvas, 213.5 x 213.5 cm.  
Whitney Museum of Modern Art

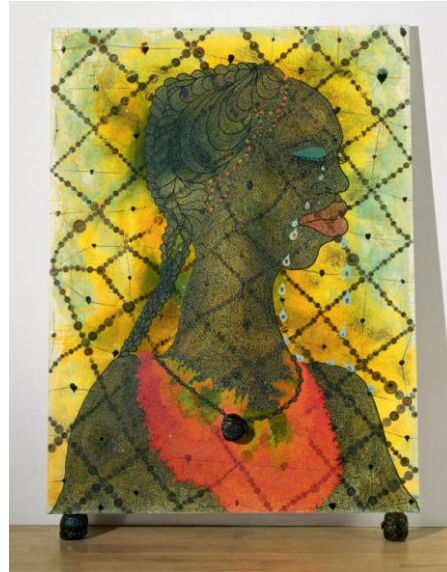


**Pl. 43** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Hollywood Africans in Front of the Chinese Theater with Footprints of Movie Stars*, 1983. Acrylic and oilstick on canvas on wooden supports, 90 x 207 cm. The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat.





**Pl. 44** Chris Ofili, *The Adoration of Captain Shit and the Legend of the Black Stars*, 1998  
Oil, acrylic, polyester resin, paper collage, glitter, map pins and elephant dung on linen, 243.8 x 182.8 cm. Tate



**Pl. 45** Chris Ofili, *No Woman No Cry*, 1998  
Oil, acrylic, graphite, polyester resin, printed paper, glitter, map pins and elephant dung on canvas, 243.8 x 182.8cm. Tate



**Pl.46** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Boy and Dog in a Johnnypump*, 1982  
Acrylic, oilstick and spray paint on canvas, 240 x 420.5 cm  
The Brant Foundation



**Pl. 47** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Self-Portrait*, 1986  
Acrylic on canvas, 180 x 206.5 cm. MACBA collection



## Chapter 5

### Standing at the Crossroads: Analysis of Three Paintings

*'I had some money. I made the best paintings ever. I was completely reclusive, worked a lot, took a lot of drugs.'*

Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1985 <sup>1</sup>

In this concluding chapter I will analyse three of Basquiat's late paintings: *Eroica II*, *Riding with Death*, and *Exu*, all painted in 1988. During this final year of Basquiat's life, following a one night showing of his work at the Vrej Baghoomian Gallery, New York, in January, the artist travelled with the exhibition to Düsseldorf and then to Paris, where he spent several months. He returned to New York in April for a further exhibition of the work, which included *Eroica I* and *II* and *Riding with Death*, at the Baghoomian Gallery. Later in April Basquiat visited the New Orleans Jazz Festival with friend and fellow artist Outarra Watts, before travelling to Hawaii in May, in an effort to quit his heroin addiction, finally returning to New York in July via Los Angeles. Those who spent time with Basquiat during the final months of his life speak of his increasing dependence on heroin, his disenchantment with the art world and his desire to reinvent himself as a writer.<sup>2</sup> Whilst Basquiat's world appears to have been unravelling during this time, these late paintings are fine examples of his prowess, and development as a painter over the ten year period of his career. The works characterise the enduring themes within Basquiat's expansive body of work: his use of the written word as a form of visual expression; his commitment to the continuation of an art historical tradition; and his reclamation of spiritual and cultural emblems from his own heritage. These themes, which I have examined in earlier chapters, are here revisited in my analysis of these late paintings as representing the culmination of Basquiat's work, in the same way in which Basquiat himself revisited them; adding layer upon layer to the dialogue he created on life and death in 1980s New York.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Eroica II, 1988**

As an aspiring artist Basquiat had used the medium of the written word to launch his career. In the guise of SAMO© he gained notoriety through his poetic writing in a self-promotional assault on the New York art scene, critiquing the bourgeois, capitalist world he paradoxically aspired to enter. His graffiti writings under the pseudonym SAMO© were conceptual, more akin to poetry than the territorial *Wildstyle* street tags characteristic of the 1970s, and throughout his paintings Basquiat continued to integrate the written word into visual art form. In the paired works, *Eroica I & II*, 1988 (Pl.48 & 49) this juxtaposition between writing and drawing, reading and seeing is blended in a subtly codified representation of modern drug culture. The paintings express the artist's personal obsessions at the time of painting, in language so codified that the viewer of the work has to be in a position of understanding Basquiat's lexicon, and the issues he addresses, to see 'the writing on the wall.' Both paintings, currently held in the Nicola Erni Collection, Munich are rendered in acrylic, oilstick and pencil on paper mounted on canvas. The works were originally created as one painting and separated by the artist after their completion, and are therefore, ideally viewed in relation to one another. Whilst the focus of this analysis rests upon the more complex composition, *Eroica II* which represents Basquiat's masterful use of the written word within visual representation, I will also make reference to *Eroica I*.

Like several of Basquiat's earliest paintings,<sup>4</sup> the visual elements of *Eroica II* suggest the stylistic influence of Twombly, particularly in the choice of compositional elements, comprised largely of listed words, and in the choice of colour and form; the *Eroica* paintings are noticeably similar to Twombly's *Herodiade*, 1960 (Pl.50), so much so, that Basquiat's work might almost be considered a reworking of Twombly's. Shortly after painting *Eroica I & II* Basquiat visited an exhibition of Twombly's work whilst in Paris, demonstrating not only his continued commitment to learning from the work of other artists, but also his characteristic trait of repeatedly revisiting those influences and ideas that engaged him, reworking them over time in his own unique style. Like *Herodiade*, the background of *Eroica II* remains unworked, revealing the natural ecru hue of the paper. The overall roughness of the application is reminiscent of the crudest of all graffiti, the scribbling on the wall of the communal stairwell, public toilet, or narcotic shooting gallery. The title of Basquiat's painting may refer to Beethoven's *Symphony No.3* or more subtly, to the Spanish term for opiate derived drugs. Against the pale, mottled background, the scratched text is partly obscured by smudges of grey and blue paint. On the left hand side of the painting, in feint blue oilstick, Basquiat has inscribed in repeated rows a hobo symbol, taken from Dreyfuss's *Symbol Sourcebook*<sup>5</sup> together with its meaning; 'MAN DIES'. The inscription is partly obscured by spots and smears of blood red oilstick, similar to those in Twombly's painting. These red marks suggest the spattered blood stains common around places where heroin is injected.

In the centre of the composition, in black oilstick, are listed slang terms to be found in the works of the 1950s jazz musicians and Beat writers Basquiat so admired:

BAGPIPE: 1940S VACUUM CLEANER  
 BALE OF STRAW: WHITE BLOND FEMALE  
 BALL & CHAIN: WIFE  
 BALLOON ROOM: PLACE WHERE MARIJUANA IS SMOKED  
 BALLS . TESTICLES  
 BAM: (FROM BAMBITA)  
 BANANA: ATTRACTIVE LIGHT SKINNED BLACK FEMALE  
BAND: WOMAN  
BANG: INJECTION OF NARCOTICS  
 BANJO: INSTR FRM WST AFRICA  
 BANK TOILET  
 BARK: HUMAN SKIN

Several of the words are encircled in red: VACUUM; BALLOON; PLACE WHERE; WOMAN; OF NARCOTICS; BANK and TOILET. The text conjures the dissolute glamour of a subterranean existence and reflects Basquiat's reading and interests at the time of painting.<sup>6</sup> In the lower foreground of the composition the letters TNT (- 6H2CH) are boldly inscribed in black oilstick. These letters refer to a highly explosive chemical compound (trinitrotoluene) which in its raw form has a similar appearance to brown heroin. It is this reference which most strongly suggests that the title of the work is used in reference to opiates, as well as classical music.

Within the similar painting *Eroica I* the title of the work is listed repeatedly, together with the phrases 'MAN DIES' and 'FOR BLUES. FIXIN TO DIE BLUES.' These written elements within both the *Eroica* paintings, together with the compositional elements suggestive of urban graffiti, combine to create a visual representation of the harshest realities of the drug culture Basquiat was immersed in. Basquiat greatly admired bohemian writers and musicians of earlier

decades, such as Jack Kerouac and Charlie Parker, whose work suggested an outlaw existence, removed from the security of the middle-class New York society in which he had grown up. One of Basquiat's many drawings held in the Schorr Family Collection, *Untitled (History of Jazz)*, 1983 (Pl. 51) shows a visual mapping of information relating to jazz music collated by the artist. The drawing demonstrates Basquiat's research into the subject and his noting the association of 'ALCOHOL' with early Ragtime musicians popular at the turn of the century, and 'OPIATES' with later musical heroes such as Jack Johnson and Cab Calloway, popular from the 1920s. Biographic information suggests that this romantic idea of the artist as outsider, exploring an alternative reality through the use of mind-expanding drugs, was very real to Basquiat at the time of painting *Eroica II*, however, the painting also articulates a sense of sadness and disillusionment with those pursuits.<sup>7</sup>

Like Twombly, Basquiat uses the subtle layering of smeared colour and scrawled text within the work to evoke the pentimento, or accidental layering, characteristic of graffiti on city walls, and in this way the painting is also reminiscent of the artist's early graffiti writings. At the end of his career Basquiat the painter still weaves the thread of graffiti through his work, although from the outset, there was nothing accidental in Basquiat's use of language. Whether spray-painted on a wall, inscribed in oilstick on canvas, or Xeroxed and collaged to form visual pattern, the multitudinous hand-written lists and emblems contained within Basquiat's work are always purposeful. Words or letters are emphasised, contained or obscured, to add depth to implied or suggested meaning; key words and phrases are used repeatedly throughout the artist's oeuvre, leading the viewer to ponder their significance. Basquiat's use of language is both ambiguous and fascinating. He invites the viewer of his work to decipher meaning, thus engaging with the work on an intimate level, and this is seen clearly within *Eroica II*.

The inclusion of the enigmatic title of the *Eroica* paintings is first seen in several works painted during the previous year, suggesting that the artist, who would no doubt have appreciated the punning double meaning, was reflecting on this word over time. In *Pegasus*, 1987 (Pl. 52) the word 'EROICA' is included within an intricately composed pattern of complex notation; visual imagery constructed of multitudinous words, signs and symbols, largely derived from Dreyfuss' Symbol Sourcebook. In *Untitled, (Sky)* 1987 (Pl. 53) the word appears again, within a collaged composition referencing a nightmarish mixture of perishable substances and featuring two large heads, with grimacing mouths and crossed, unseeing eyes, an emblem used by Basquiat to suggest intoxication.<sup>8</sup> In the upper right of this painting Basquiat has obscured the inscription 'NOT K,' a reference to an earlier painting entitled *K*, 1982 which depicts the capitalist 'DISEASE CULTURE' surrounding the drug Ketamine, popular on the New York club scene Basquiat frequented. Again, in another painting created in 1987, also entitled *Eroica* (Pl. 54) the term is included within a collaged background, inscribed repeatedly in list form, at times deleted but forming the focal point of the painting.

Words were important to Basquiat so it is not surprising to discover that he reflected on a given word over a prolonged period of time. Klaus Kertess has written of the artist, 'He loved words for their sense, for their sound, and for their look; he gave eyes, ears, mouth – and soul – to words. He liked to say he used words like brushstrokes.'<sup>9</sup> Basquiat was as much a poet as an artist, moving fluidly from text to image, and embedding text within image; making image from text. This aspect of the artist's work was addressed in the Brooklyn Museum's 2015 exhibition, *Basquiat: the Unknown Notebooks*, which focused upon a collection of Basquiat's notebooks kept from 1980 – 1987. The notebooks, standard school exercise books, containing

a range of writings including memos, lists, random ideas and poems, are described by collector Larry Warsh as being of 'seminal importance' in providing an understanding of 'the conscious and unconscious mind of the artist.'<sup>10</sup> Exhibition curator Dieter Buchhart argues that, 'Not only does in-depth study of the notebooks close a gap in the research to date, but it also provides a new perspective on Basquiat's work and its place in art history.'<sup>11</sup> Buchhart makes reference to the notebooks of earlier artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Joseph Beuys, considered works of art in their own right, in his assertion that Basquiat's notebooks are an important element to his overall body of work (similarities between Basquiat's drawings and those contained within da Vinci's sketchbooks are discussed later in this chapter). Buchhart's claim supports a statement made by the artist himself in 1982 in discussion with Henry Geldzhaler. In response to Geldzhaler's comment that he liked best 'the drawings that are just lists of things,' Basquiat replied, 'I was making one in an airplane once. I was copying some stuff out of a Roman sculpture book. This lady said, 'Oh, what are you studying?' I said, 'It's a drawing.'<sup>12</sup> Clearly, Basquiat saw was no distinction between textual and visual representation,<sup>13</sup> and Buchhart recognises the way in which Basquiat uses the written word 'to generate duality'<sup>14</sup> between these forms in his work. Critic Demosthenes Davvetas describes the way in which the 'heterogeneous' linguistic elements of Basquiat's paintings, often appearing random and unrelated in isolation, 'from the moment of their juxtaposition within the work... change, fusing into one body... becoming a fragment' of the whole.<sup>15</sup> For Davvetas these signs have a double function; speaking 'of both the visible and what is usually little noticed.'<sup>16</sup> This is an idea I want to further develop: Basquiat's use of the written word goes beyond signification of the dual relationship between visual and textual representation; his emphasis of particular words, through underlining, or positioning in boxes of containment, signals significance, and his obscuring of particular words, or signs, engages a deeper deconstruction of meaning.

Thompson suggested that Basquiat's close reading of Twombly might provide the source of his frequent use of erasure, but that whereas Twombly deletes portions of text in order to completely obscure,<sup>17</sup> Basquiat cancels to reveal. Basquiat explained this practice to Thompson in interview in 1987 explaining, 'I cross out words so that you will see them more; the fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them.'<sup>18</sup> Thompson noted the link between Basquiat's practice of crossing out words in order to reveal, and Derrida's theory of *sous rature*; the nature of erasure used to add depth to implied meaning, developed from the earlier work of Heidegger,<sup>19</sup> and this idea bears closer examination. Working in the 1960s, philosopher Jacques Derrida's extensive theories of semiotic analysis known as 'deconstruction' explore the ways in which knowledge and meaning are constructed. Derrida's work focuses on the way in which language, commonly used to convey meaning, in fact, conveys both the presence and absence of meaning, because the meaning of each word (or sign) depends on its difference from another word, seen as the corresponding half of its binary pair. Each word therefore, contains a trace of that other, absent word and its meaning. This idea of *Différance*; together with the difference between the signifier and the signified, as signs defer to other signs, and interpretation of any given sign is different in each instance, is a complex one and is key to Derrida's argument, which suggests that there can be no universal truths or common understanding of language. This way of thinking undermines traditional binary oppositions inherent within conventional Western thinking, and although his work focuses primarily on textual representation, Derrida's theories can, and have, been applied to visual art. These theories are particularly interesting when considered in relation to the work of Basquiat which contains an abundance of written iconography and nuanced meaning.<sup>20</sup>

Derrida's notion of *sous rature*; writing with erasure, refers to the act of deletion in order to denounce the trace, or preconceived values, contained within a word. This technique is often seen in Basquiat's art. In early works such as *Undiscovered Genius*, 1982-3 (Pl. 22) discussed in Chapter 2, the artist's deletion of the term ~~BLUESMAN~~ implies a rejection of the traditional label ascribed to the black musician of the Mississippi Delta. The term 'bluesman' is too laden with traces of meaning which are visually illustrated by Basquiat within this composition: traces of slavery and commercial capitalism. Basquiat visibly writes the term ~~BLUESMAN~~ *sous rature*, or with deletion, above the more apt description of the musician; 'GRIOT' emphasised in a box of containment. As Basquiat explained, 'I put a lot down, and then I take a lot away. Then I put some more down and I take some more away. So it's like a constant editing process usually.'<sup>21</sup>

Through visible deletion of four out of the seven inscriptions of the word 'EROICA' in the first *Eroica* painting of 1987, Basquiat suggests to the viewer a rejection of the most obvious definition of the term, Beethoven's *Symphony No.3*, in favour of a more obscure interpretation which is developed in the 1988 paintings *Eroica I* and *II*. However, the trace of this initial obvious definition remains. Beethoven's '*Eroica*,' originally titled '*Bonaparte*,' was inspired by the French revolutionary Emperor. The first movement of the symphony describes Napoleon's heroic struggles to bring liberty and freedom to the French people, the slower, second movement depicts the sorrow of his death.<sup>22</sup> Basquiat enjoyed classical music, and as discussed in my earlier analyses of *Untitled (Caesar)*, 1981 (Pl.10) and *Obnoxious Liberals*, 1982 (Pl.20) he had a great interest in heroic historical figures, who feature in many of his works.<sup>23</sup> Listening to the slow, sombre melody of the funeral procession within the second movement of Beethoven's symphony, whilst viewing Basquiat's visual interpretation of a man's death, as a result of narcotic addiction, enhances the poignancy of these emotive paintings. Whilst many of his works show Basquiat's effective use of *sous rature*, these paintings demonstrate his sophisticated manipulation of language, which engages the resonance of both the visible word and its absent trace.

From his earliest inscription on the walls of SoHo buildings, to that contained within these final paintings, Basquiat, artist and poet, uses language, often coded or obscure, to engage the viewer of his work.<sup>24</sup> It is not enough to glance briefly at a Basquiat painting in a gallery; to fully understand, one has to spend time studying the work, searching for the traces and subtle meanings within the compositions. Basquiat's explanation to Thompson of the way in which he crossed out words, or obscured them, to make the viewer desire to see, or read, them more, demonstrates the way in which his work can be seen to characterise Derrida's theories. Through his sophisticated use of inscription and deletion in his art, Basquiat invites the viewer to join him in a visual and intellectual unravelling of language and its implicit layers of meaning. This deep engagement with the audience is evident throughout Basquiat's writing and artwork. The painting *Eroica II* offers a perfect example of Basquiat's purposeful engagement of the viewer of his work, as an active participant in understanding, unfolding layers of subtle information to reveal meaning. The encrypted symbols of the hobo; the slang of the outcast junkie; the influence of the Beat writers, Twombly and Beethoven; the sadness of a symphony - all are woven together in the painting with the same cryptic sleight of hand displayed by SAMO©. Perhaps Basquiat's *Eroica II* is best viewed alongside one of the artist's poems in order to fully appreciate his evocative use of the written word:<sup>25</sup>

## PSALM.

THIS IS NOT IN PRAISE OF POISON  
ING MYSELF. WAITING FOR IDEAS  
TO HAPPEN. MYSELF. THIS IS NOT  
IN PRAISE OF POISON IS THIS IS NOT  
THE NON POISONOUS POISONED  
SO SELF RIGHTEOUS POISONED  
NO ONE IS CLEAN  
FROM RED MEAT TO WHITE  
POISON  
THIS IS NOT IN PRASIE OF POISON  
THE BIGGEST BUISNESS  
UGLY, FAT LIKE A PIG

THE CUSTOMER IN NEW YORK  
CHICAGO DETROIT

### **Riding with Death**

Also painted during the final year of Basquiat's life, and exhibited alongside the *Eroica* paintings in 1988, *Riding with Death* (Pl.55) presents a marked contrast in both composition and technique; it is a painting of minimal compositional elements, which emphasises Basquiat's sophisticated use of colour and form. However, the work contains the same subtle depth of meaning as the previously discussed works, and highlights the artist's investment in an art historical tradition and extensive visual literacy. Based upon da Vinci's drawing *Allegory of Envy*, 1483-85 (Pl.56), *Riding with Death* further demonstrates Basquiat's previously discussed incorporation of art historical sources, and also, viewed as a final self-portrait, his situation of the black subject within the canon of art history.

The painting, currently held in a private collection, is rendered in acrylic and oilstick on canvas. Set against a flat background of soft, brownish, yellow iron oxide, an earth pigment, and one of the oldest colours used by painters, the central element of the work is a brown figure sitting astride a white skeleton, crouched on all fours. The figure of the rider appears incomplete: the torso and left leg expressing both the internal skeleton and the external physicality of the body; the right leg merely suggested by the beginning of an outline in black oilstick, and the outstretched arms and hands represented as simple black and white lines. As in Basquiat's *Self-Portrait*, 1982 (Pl.35) the right hand of the figure appears enlarged; each finger accentuated in both black and white oilstick, and the wrist encircled in a swirl of orange, representing creative power, and clearly suggesting that this is a representation of the artist. However, unlike previous self-portraits in which the head is crowned by Basquiat's characteristic dreadlocks, the head of the figure is here expressed as a scrawled circular tangle of black marks, framed within a roughly rectangular orange shape which links it to the heart. A single eye positioned in the centre of the head, is focused directly upon the viewer of the work and accentuated in white oilstick. This single eye, reminiscent of the protective Eye of Horus, found in the Egyptian hieroglyphs often referred to in Basquiat's work, signals an element of spiritual strength upon the figure of the rider. His posture, both graceful and strong, simultaneously reveals the mortality of his skeletal form, yet his outstretched arms are active tools of creativity, and his gaze all powerful. The skeletal form upon which the rider is seated faces toward the left of the canvas, but its skull is turned towards the viewer, its hollow eyes

marked with crosses denoting intoxication or ignorance. The image shows the domination of the rider over this representation of death. However, within the jaws and raised right hand of the skeleton are fragments of the brown and black oilstick used to depict the body of the rider, denoting the way in which death has already inflicted wounds upon this mortal figure.

Several writers, including Buchhart, have observed the way in which this painting 'was to become an icon of the artist's death and a matrix for his mythical status,'<sup>26</sup> and some have retrospectively suggested that the painting represents a premonition of death.<sup>27</sup> As my analysis of *Eroica II* has shown, Basquiat was clearly very aware of his own mortality at this time; this is not only detailed in biographical accounts, but is also evident in the darkness of his work.<sup>28</sup> However, I would argue that *Riding with Death* is in fact a representation of power; the rider, although wounded, presides victorious over death, alluding to Basquiat's belief in his own ability to remain in control of his life threatening addiction. Kertess describes the painting as 'an electrifying icon of the Faustian contract entered into by Basquiat,' following in the wake of his Bebop and Beat predecessors, in their pursuit of drugs 'not only as an escape from an alien world but transport into the making of art.'<sup>29</sup>

Hoban's biography sets out the context within which the painting was created, describing the way in which Basquiat's heroin use had affected his working life and his relationships with dealers such as Nosei and Bischofberger, who had urged him to seek treatment. This led to Basquiat engaging the relatively inexperienced Vrej Baghoomian, who was willing to condone his lifestyle, as his art dealer. In an effort to ensure Basquiat produced the necessary work for the 1988 exhibition, Baghoomian employed artist Rick Prol as Basquiat's studio assistant. Prol worked with Basquiat for six months as he painted the works that would be exhibited in his final show and describes the working process;

'He wouldn't communicate very much (but) he allocated exactly what I would do. He would allow me to paint sections the way he wanted them, and he was still very much in control. The idea was that he would hand paint the whole thing. But there were certain flat areas that needed to be filled in.'<sup>30</sup>

Following Basquiat's direction, Prol painted the background of *Riding with Death*, and watched Basquiat complete the work; 'He had a da Vinci book open. He changed the drawing a lot from da Vinci.'<sup>31</sup> Prol was impressed by Basquiat's talent, and his spontaneous way of working, drawing upon a realm of source material found in books and in his own previous work. In *Riding with Death* Basquiat draws upon da Vinci's allegorical drawing depicting Envy, judged never to die, as a woman riding upon Death. Her face is fair, masking her true nature, but her head is wounded by branches of palm, olive and myrtle, symbolising her abhorrence of truth and victory. Wearing a leopard's skin, and with a serpent around her neck, she carries a vase of flowers, scorpions and toads. This figure bears no direct resemblance to the rider in Basquiat's painting, however, the image of the skeleton is noticeably similar, both in its posture and its gaze focused on the viewer. It is the overall compositional structure, and the form of the skeleton that Basquiat appropriates here, together with the theme of rider and ridden.

As previously discussed in Chapter 2, Basquiat educated himself in art history during his time spent in New York's museums and galleries from an early age, and through his prolific reading. Whilst he spoke of initially wanting to attack the gallery circuit, 'making fun of the paintings that were in there, then making more paintings,'<sup>32</sup> Basquiat's admiration for those artists he learned from is clear within his work, and his interest in the work of a Vinci is evident in his

own paintings from 1982 onwards.<sup>33</sup> In April of that year, Fred Hoffmann, employed by Gagosian to assist Basquiat in the production of several silk-screen prints made during his time in Los Angeles, recalls the artist's interest in da Vinci. Having recently completed his doctorate in Art History, Hoffmann shared several books on Leonardo with Basquiat who produced prints of his own drawings on acetates, based on da Vinci's work, together with the painting *Leonardo da Vinci's Greatest Hits*, 1982 (Pl. 57) exhibited at the Fun Gallery in November 1982. In his essay to accompany his curation of the 2014 exhibition of Basquiat drawings in the Schorr Family Collection, Hoffmann observes the way in which Basquiat found in da Vinci's drawings, 'a viable means of educating himself about human form and function,' and how 'Leonardo's seemingly compulsive investigation of human anatomy and physiology would become a lifelong passion for Basquiat,'<sup>34</sup> who as a child, had begun drawing from his studies of Gray's Anatomy at the age of seven. In *Leonardo da Vinci's Greatest Hits*, Basquiat includes references to da Vinci's studies of the human leg, foot and torso, together with the image of a slave, working with a sledgehammer on the railroad, and his own signature crowns. Hoffmann observes that whilst Basquiat learned a great deal from studying da Vinci, 'he never lost sight of his own artistic vision.' So this blending of references to Leonardo with those icons of black history that were of concern to Basquiat express his 'means of balancing... an historical past with the reality of the here and now... (Thus) the subject of *Leonardo da Vinci's Greatest Hits* is the underlying duality of complementary, constantly interacting and shifting realms of consciousness making up human existence.'<sup>35</sup>

Basquiat's unique ability to absorb and synthesise cultural references, mixing them into iconography that was very much his own, is also pointed out by Thompson, in his account of the artist's early 'name-checking' of da Vinci in his poetry. During 1979, performing at the Mudd Club in the experimental noise band Gray, Basquiat recited:

Mona Lisa, Mona Lisa  
men have named you a second-class citizen  
tea-stained brown  
with pages missing  
if shown the motor  
each man would use  
two hundred pounds of effort  
denied the logic of a  
primitive cartoon.

For Thompson this early poem shows the young Basquiat 'working out a bemused equation, fame, beauty, and social abrasion, that later flowed through his painting;' through the referencing of this 'famous name, making her black, defending her from philistines, he was simultaneously asserting self against a flux of anti-art and anti-black predicaments.'<sup>36</sup>

Basquiat's poem also observes the way in which physical effort is more commonly deployed in society's evolution, whereas greater logic might be found in artistic creativity.

Throughout his career Basquiat drew inspiration from the sizeable and richly illustrated text *Leonardo da Vinci*, published in the 1950s by Reynal & Company. In countless drawings held in the Schorr Family Collection Basquiat makes direct copies of the classical figures and anatomical studies made by da Vinci,<sup>37</sup> and a number of his paintings show interpretations of da Vinci's themes. In *Boone*, 1983 (Pl.58) Basquiat defaces a collaged image of the Mona Lisa in



the style of a graffiti artist, adorning her with a winking eye and grimacing smile – a cynical homage to dealer Mary Boone. In *Untitled*, 1983 (Pl.59) he makes a direct study of Leonardo's FIVE GROTESQUE HEADS, adding in Spanish MUY FAO (Sp. *muy feo*, or very ugly) characteristically using his mother tongue to establish ownership, and in the bottom right of the canvas inscribing the phrase, ALTER EGO, signalling his identification with da Vinci as a fellow painter. Marshall argues that from his study of da Vinci Basquiat also drew inspiration for the extensive lists he included in many of his paintings (although this technique may also be after Twombly) and for the complex drawings of mechanical devices he made in drawings such as *Pegasus*, 1987(Pl.52).<sup>38</sup> In his own painting entitled *Mona Lisa*, 1983 (Pl. 60) Basquiat brings together two sources of artistic inspiration, situating da Vinci's famous icon in the context of the American dollar bill, after Warhol's silk screen paintings, highlighting the nature of art as a commodity within capitalism. In another interpretation of the *Mona Lisa*, entitled *Lye*, 1983 (Pl.61) Basquiat depicts the icon as an elegant figure, standing against a densely squared background, above her head is inscribed the caption 'PROCESSED HAIR.' 'KONKED' 'GASSED.' In the top right of the canvas is a portrait of jazz singer Nat King Cole, identified by his name and a crown. In the bottom right of the painting, beside the image of *Mona Lisa*, are both right and left hands, each with numbered fingers, referencing Cole's talent as a pianist. The painting references Cole's 1950 hit record, *Mona Lisa*, but also speaks of the subtle racisms inherent within Western notions of beauty, which favour the Caucasian image. Beside the *Mona Lisa*'s long straight hair Basquiat includes brown smears, which we also see on the fingers of the left hand; smears of lye, the chemical used to 'conk,' or straighten black hair from the 1920s to the 1950s.<sup>39</sup>

Basquiat's characteristic use of appropriation, absorbing myriad collections of information, signs, symbols and images into his own artistic sensibility, demonstrates both his engagement with, and critique of modernism. As discussed in Chapter 4, whilst Basquiat does not wholeheartedly adopt the postmodernist's deconstruction of modernism, often using appropriation as a means of developing his technique as a painter, he does however, also use this as a means of revising the narrative of Western modernism; writing himself into the canon of art history. This argument is particularly relevant if *Riding with Death* is viewed as the artist's final self-portrait. I have previously observed, in my consideration of Basquiat's influence upon a post-black aesthetic, the way in which he uses self-portraiture in order to situate the black subject, devoid of stereotypical features, at the heart of painting, in order to (in Enwezor's words), 'situate blackness within the canon of European art.'<sup>40</sup> In this painting Basquiat appropriates the work of arguably the most revered of all painters within the canon, and situates an image of himself as a dominant figure within the work. Interestingly, the subject of da Vinci's drawing is itself similar to an earlier image seen depicted upon a 15<sup>th</sup> century ewer, which illustrates the medieval legend of Phyllis, wife of Aristotle, who rides her husband through the streets, as punishment for his infidelities. This grotesque satire symbolises a reversal of the power structure within the relationship between husband and wife, as the rider appears dominant over the ridden. Some scholarship has suggested a direct link between da Vinci's possible source material and Basquiat's painting, arguing that *Riding with Death* exposes the historic horror of Western oppression over the black subject, and reverses this dynamic of subjugation as the rider triumphs over domination.<sup>41</sup> It is not clear whether Basquiat was aware of the legend of Phyllis and Aristotle, although the artefact depicting the legend is held in the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, and Basquiat, as a frequent visitor to New York's museums, and known to have been familiar with the museum's

collections, may well have recognised, and been amused by, the possible appropriation in da Vinci's drawing. Basquiat would also have been aware of Schnabel's painting *Death*, 1981, (Pl. 62) another interpretation of the theme which depicts the skeleton of death riding a mortal steed.

In his interpretation of Leonardo's allegory, Basquiat, in turn reveals both artistic and political allegorical meaning on several levels. Firstly, by drawing attention to the similarity between his own working practice and that of da Vinci and Schnabel, Basquiat establishes a dialogue between his own work and that of other artists, past and present. Furthermore, in the same way that Basquiat's griot inspired paintings placed his work within discourse surrounding Picasso's Western appropriation of African art, through his reworking of da Vinci, Basquiat places his work once more within the context of European art history, establishing a connection across time and continents across the *Black Atlantic*. Basquiat's painting revises the conceptual power structure represented within the allegory and the earlier legend of Phyllis and Aristotle, bringing it up to date and making it political. In casting the black subject as the rider, wounded but victorious over death, Basquiat speaks of the victory of an oppressed people. As his father Gerard Basquiat said, 'Jean-Michel was very bright... and very politically oriented. He didn't have to politicize through a microphone. The works possess messages and speak for themselves.'<sup>42</sup> Throughout his body of work Basquiat samples and mixes imagery both ancient and modern, selecting different cultural signifiers without hierarchy, and synthesising these elements to form a new unique lexicon of his own, which he uses repeatedly to open dialectic concerning issues of racial inequality. Basquiat's political agenda is written throughout his oeuvre, at times overtly, and here with subtle sophistication. *Riding with Death* demonstrates Basquiat's skill in recuperating from a historical past knowledge and information to rewrite art history.

## Exu

In Chapter 3 I examined Basquiat's identification with the talismanic character of the griot, as both storyteller, and connection between the aesthetic and the mystical. Basquiat's sophisticated manipulation of the transformative quality of migratory motifs is a key theme to my thesis, and I have discussed the way in which his invocation of the spiritual elements of African visual forms as represented in Caribbean culture, blended with his fusion of languages and American Pop art styling, extend previous intercultural perspectives in visual art, engaging a new culturally diverse sensibility, which resonates with Gilroy's multiplicity of modernisms across the *Black Atlantic*. This transnational, intercultural perspective, woven throughout Basquiat's oeuvre, is captured in one of Basquiat's most expressive and dynamic paintings, *Exu*, 1988 (Pl.63).

Created during the final year of Basquiat's life, this work was not exhibited until after the artist's death at the Galerie Enrico Navarra, Paris in 1989.<sup>43</sup> The painting in acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas depicts the Vodoun òrìsà Exu, guardian of the crossroads. The background of the work is painted a flat, chalky white, allowing the figurative elements of the composition to stand out strongly. Central to the painting is the figure of Exu, standing amidst a swirling whirlwind of all-seeing eyes of power, signifying the protective nature of the òrìsà. Strong brushstrokes of bright, translucent yellow, finer yellow and brown lines and flames of day-glo orange add movement to the overall image and contribute to the effect of energy in the work. In the top centre of the canvas the title EXU is inscribed in black oilstick, the letter X held

within a box of containment marked in brown. The emphasis on the letter X points to the linguistic evolution of the name of the òrisà over time; like the griot, grillo, or gri gri, Exu, is also known by the names Eshu, Eleggùà and Papa Legba, existing within the spiritual systems of Vodou, Santeria and Candomblé which developed out of West African Yoruba culture. Basquiat takes the Portuguese Brazilian spelling in his title but points to the transformative nature of this deity and his titles, present in all African inspired religions across the diaspora.

Exu is regarded as gatekeeper of the spiritual world, standing at the crossroads between life and death. Like the Catholic Saint Anthony, he acts as a patron of travellers and is also seen as guarding the crossroads of fate and fortune, often referred to in times of decision making. Basquiat would have been familiar with visual representations of Exu in Yoruba art from his reading of Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit*, which features a photograph of a wood carving of the òrisà in human form, with a long, knife-like protrusion rising from the top of his head, symbolising the expression of his powers (Pl.64). In some representations Exu is depicted with horns or playing a flute, and as over time African traditions merged with Catholicism, the identity of Exu was associated with Santo Niño d'Atocha and he also became represented in the form of a child. Saggese notes Basquiat's interpretation of traditional images of the òrisà seen in the painting *Antar*, 1985 (Pl.65). The title of this work refers to *antara*, South American panpipes, and the composition shows Exu in human form playing a flute and includes two direct copies of the statuette featured in *Flash of the Spirit*.

However, Basquiat's depiction of Exu in the 1988 painting bears little resemblance to these traditional forms, and takes on a modern, cartoon-like guise. Standing with feet planted strongly, one arm resting on his hip, and the other outstretched, holding a pair of spears, their arrowed tips and vertical lines pointing upward representing his strength and spirituality, the Exu stares to the right of the canvas. His brown, angular face is lit by gleaming eyes, outlined in black and red, his nose is long and beneath a slick moustache, his grimacing smile reveals sharp, pointed teeth. From the top of his head rise two long pointed ears, giving him the appearance of a wily coyote, and denoting his mythical nature to be that of a trickster, who speaks with forked tongue. Thompson describes how Western missionaries to West Africa considered the Yoruba deity a representation of the devil <sup>44</sup> and some scholars have argued that this multidimensional character, with the ability to act for both good and evil, in an effort to survive amidst adversity, is the inspiration for the character of Br'er Rabbit in the *Uncle Remus Stories* of the American South, and Anansi the spider in Jamaican folklore.<sup>45</sup> These hidden layers of Exu's nature are further suggested in Basquiat's painting as concealed beneath the deep, cobalt blue of his torso, Exu's name is inscribed in black oilstick upon his chest.

The figure's left hand is left unshaded, but the thumb and four fingers are each accentuated in brown paint, giving an impression of dexterity. The feet of the figure are also unshaded but delicately outlined in black oilstick, as if the figure is wearing soft boots, which may highlight Exu's mythical role as a nomadic wanderer. A downward facing arrow to the right of the figure, together with an upward pointing arrow to the left, add to the effect of a swirling maelstrom surrounding Exu, and scattered about his feet are numerous cylindrical forms. These represent the cigarettes traditionally given as offerings to the òrisà, and Basquiat has inscribed on the right of the canvas ~~TOBACCO VICE~~. As previously discussed, Basquiat's use of *sous rature*, cancelling to reveal, is at all times significant, and here the absent trace in both words suggests a reminder of the colonial tobacco industry built upon the back of African slavery.

Kellie Jones draws comparison between the mystical themes contained within Basquiat's work and in the elusive paintings of Wifredo Lam, several of which also feature the character Exu.<sup>46</sup> This similarity, noted in Chapter 3, is based upon what would appear to be the working aims of both artists, whose work addresses issues of social justice and spirituality, bringing together historical and contemporary perspectives. Like Basquiat, Lam draws upon elements of his own diverse cultural heritage to inform his work, blending his European style of painting with themes relevant to his native Cuba. The stylistic aspects of the work of Basquiat and Lam bear little resemblance (although Lam's early work in Paris, like Picasso's draws inspiration from African masks, and may be loosely compared to Basquiat's portraits of the griot, his substantive body of work tends towards Surrealism). However, the subject matter of several of Lam's paintings, which are featured in the 2016 Tate retrospective<sup>47</sup> make for interesting comparison with Basquiat's *Exu*.

In the painting *Le Sombre Malembo (God of the Crossroads)* 1943 (Pl. 66) Lam represents Exu (here named Ellegùà) as a fantastical, horned creature standing amongst other hybrid forms within a field of sugar cane; a reference to the slavery of the sugar plantations which led to the displacement of Africans to Cuba. Lam's painting accentuates the ambiguous nature of the òrisà, which appears, face half hidden in shadow, from amongst the muted green and yellow tones of the forest background like a ghostly spectre. In another work, *The Eternal Present (Homage to Alejandro García Caturla)* 1944 (Pl.67) considered to be one of Lam's most important paintings, Lam depicts Exu within a shadowy monochrome composition of sinister hybrid figures situated within a forest of palm fronds. Here his horned head appears as if inside a bowl, reminiscent of an early twentieth century wooden Yoruba figure of Exu inside a bowl and is surrounded by other Santeria deities; Ogun, god of war and Oshun, goddess of love. Lam, whose grandmother was a Santeria priestess, was familiar with syncretic Yoruba based religions, but these paintings, made shortly after his return to Cuba following an extended period of time spent living in Europe, address issues surrounding the suppressed culture and subjugation of the Cuban people by Imperialist powers; the title paying homage to composer Alejandro García Caturla (1906 – 1940) whose music was based upon traditional African-Cuban folklore. Essentially, Lam's Surrealistic work is political in nature; he takes elements of the past and subverts them. In his own words Lam described his painting as 'an act of decolonization,'<sup>48</sup> and whilst there is no evidence that Basquiat was aware of Lam's work, he follows in the same socio-political tradition to a degree. Basquiat may well have held spiritual beliefs in the powers of Voudon deities, and engaged with those powers through his art, as suggested by Jones, but his representation of both the griot and Exu also serve to highlight the diasporic path of African cultural emblems and thus comment on the Atlantic slave trade.

Like Lam, Basquiat refers to the Caribbean as a site of cultural reference and transformation, bringing to mind the emphasis placed upon the islands as a primal site for the negotiation and syncretism of cultural values, emphasised by both Hall and Mosquera. In my study of Basquiat's griot inspired works I referred to these arguments, together with Thompson's view that the Caribbean Creolité inherent within Basquiat's art is significant to his unique capturing of the migratory nature of signs and symbols across the time and space of the diaspora.<sup>49</sup> My analysis of the painting *Water Worshipper*, 1984 (Pl.30) describes the way in which Basquiat's representation of the griot becomes a *hyperquote*, moving away from previous imagery influenced by traditional African art forms, towards a vibrant Pop art sensibility.<sup>50</sup> I argue that through his blending of African and Caribbean signs and symbols with references to

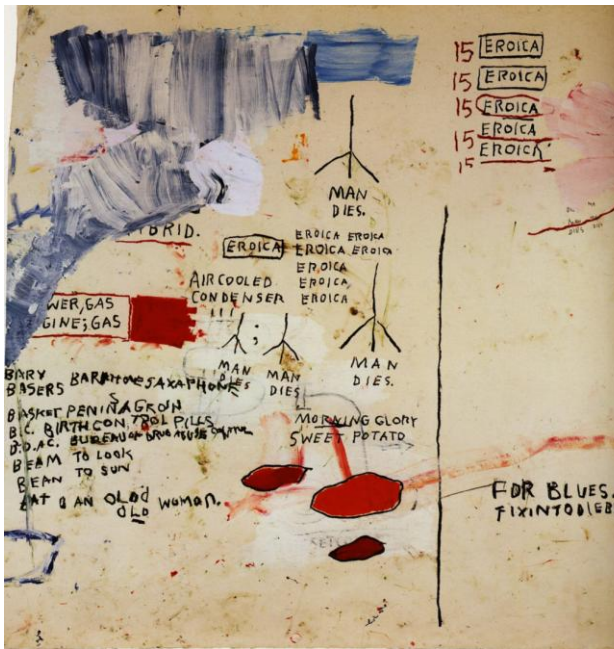
postmodern American cartoon culture, Basquiat's work characterises the 'playful diasporic intimacy' which Gilroy considers 'a marked feature of transnational black Atlantic creativity.'<sup>51</sup> This same line of thought can be applied to Basquiat's depiction of Exu, who despite his wolf-like smile, has a beguiling visual appeal, which combined with the bright colours of the swirling whirlwind surrounding him, gives the painting a marked contemporary feel reminiscent of the artist's collaborations with Warhol. Several of the works created by Basquiat during 1988 and shown at the Baghoomian Gallery share this contemporary cartoon style form, painted in bright cerulean blue, and cadmium red and yellow tones, including *The Dingoes That Park Their Brains with Their Gum* (Pl.68) and *The Mechanics That Always Have a Gear Left Over* (Pl.69) Both these paintings conceal sinister motifs within seemingly innocuous imagery: the former featuring a burning Baron Samedi along with two weapon wielding creatures; the latter including an oblique reference to TERRY LENNOX, a dissolute character in Raymond Chandler's 1953 novel *The Long Goodbye*. In these late works Basquiat not only mixes elements of diverse cultures, fragments of ancestry and modernity, but also blends shadows of the subterranean with the 'bubblegum' commercial imagery of Pop art, as if critiquing once again the darker side of art world within which he had become established. In this way Basquiat's work moves beyond that of Lam as an act of decolonisation as he situates totems of ancient spirituality within the structure of modern commercial capitalism.

Several writers have interpreted the painting *Exu* as a self-portrait, symbolising the artist himself, standing at the crossroads between life and death. Sirmans describes it as rivalling *Riding with Death* as 'one of the eeriest paintings' Basquiat created during his career and points out the further significance of the emblem of the crossroads in the music of the blues and folklore of the American South, both of which Basquiat was well versed in, alluding to blues musician Robert Johnson's legendary deal with the devil, made at a crossroads in Mississippi.<sup>52</sup> I consider it more likely that, as with the griot inspired paintings, Basquiat was paying homage, or making *ebo*, to the spirit of Exu in his depiction of the *òrisà*. Thompson recalls observing Basquiat do this as part of his daily life; 'At the corner of Houston and Broadway I watched him make what Afro-Cubans call ebo: sacrifice to the forces of the crossroads, (as he) pressed a fifty dollar bill into the hand of the man who washed the wind-shield.'<sup>53</sup> Basquiat's life at this time was clearly troubled, those close to him have spoken of his isolation from the art world, his failing health and his worries concerning the reception of his one night showing at the Baghoomian Gallery, his first solo exhibition in two years. It is feasible that the artist was again invoking elements of spiritual strength through the act of painting this ancestral totem.

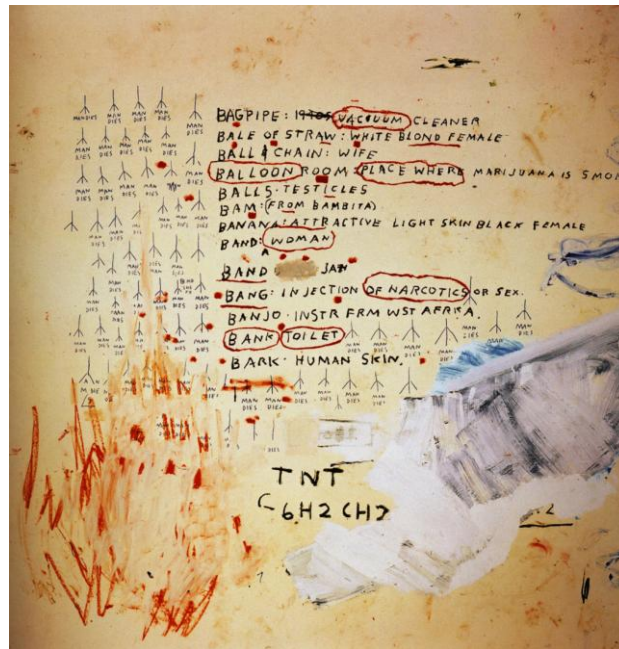
Notwithstanding these suppositions, overwhelmingly *Exu* is a vibrant painting, capturing a spirit of dynamic energy and strength. Rather than viewing it as representing Basquiat caught between life and death, I regard this work as representing the artist standing at a cultural crossroads, set against a colonial past, and pointing a way forward. Hall's argument for a *third way* forward in postcolonial art, lying not within a colonial past or utopian future, but in a new hybridity which negotiates and crosses cultural boundaries to recognise new ethnicities, based upon a diverse cultural mix, which provides the foundation for Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* is epitomised within Basquiat's art, which pushes boundaries and defies categorisation. As Thompson writes, 'Cultures clash in every major city, New York, London, Paris, and Los Angeles. For some the trend provides the greatest linguistic and cultural opportunity in history,

and Jean-Michel role-switches us through the richness, showing ways to the universal nation.’<sup>54</sup>

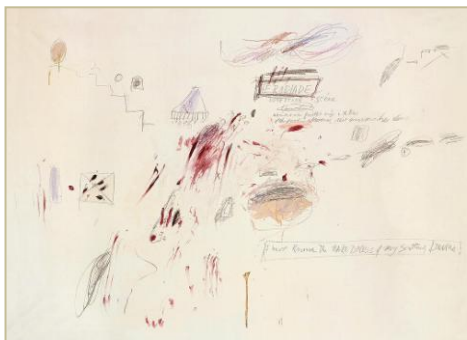
These paintings, created during the final year of Basquiat’s life, are equally ambitious in execution, subtly ironic and sophisticated in composition. Whilst each of the works is unique, viewed together they encapsulate the enduring themes inherent throughout Basquiat’s art. The works show us the artist’s kaleidoscopic pantheon of historic knowledge, and the alchemy with which he translates that knowledge into a jazz inspired improvisation of word and image; the representation of diasporic history that crosses boundaries and embraces a modern *mestizaje* of language, culture and spirituality. Moreover, these paintings demonstrate the way in which, throughout his work, Basquiat’s aesthetic challenges the inequalities inherent within ideologies of racism and capitalism, and triumphantly celebrates the history of *Black Atlantic* culture.



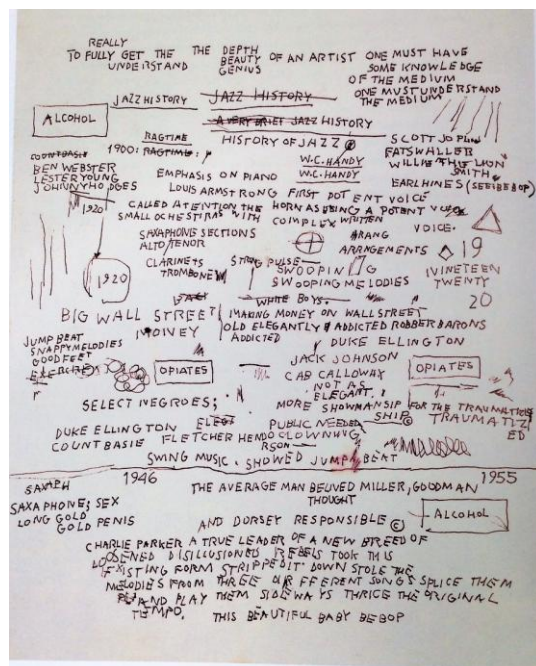
**Pl. 48** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Eroica I*, 1988  
Acrylic and oilstick on paper on canvas, 230 x 225.5cm. Private collection



**Pl.49** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Eroica II*, 1988  
Acrylic, oilstick and pencil on paper on canvas, 230 x 225.5cm. Private collection

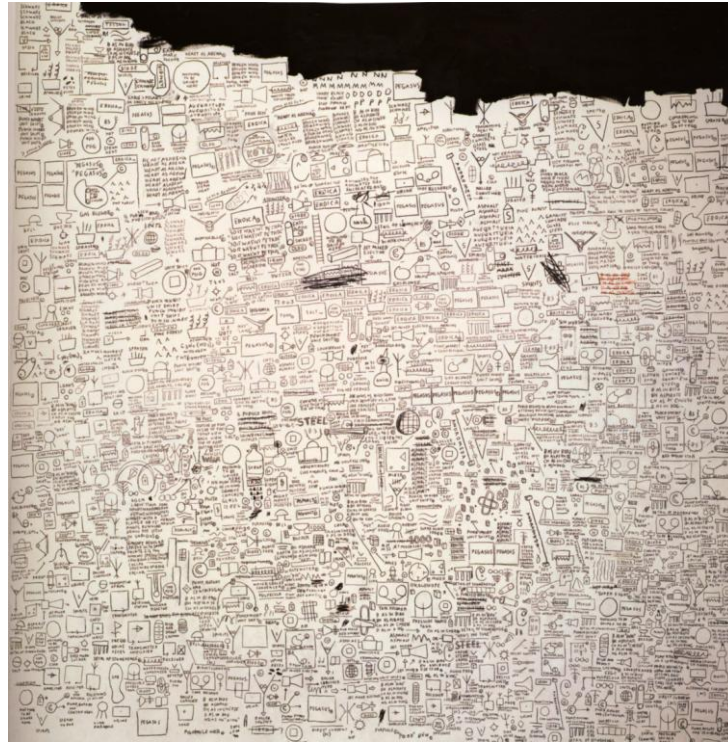


**Pl. 50** Cy Twombly, *Herodiade*, 1960  
Oil, pencil, wax crayon and house paint on canvas, 200 x 281.9cm. Gagosian Gallery



**Pl.51** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled (History of Jazz)* 1983  
Ink on paper, 26.5 x 21.5cm  
Private collection





**Pl. 52** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Pegasus*, 1987  
Acrylic, oilstick, graphite and coloured pencil on paper  
on canvas, 223.5 x 228.5cm  
Private collection



**Pl.53** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled (Sky)* 1987  
Acrylic, oil paintstick and Xerox collage on paper on  
canvas, 228.5 x 271.5cm  
Private collection



**Pl. 54** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Eroica*, 1987  
Acrylic, oil paintstick and Xerox collage on paper on  
canvas, 228.5 x 271.5cm  
Private collection

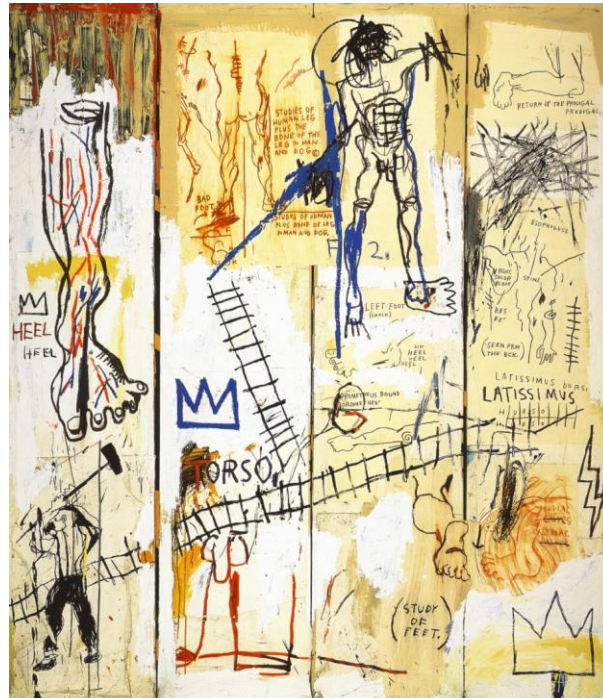




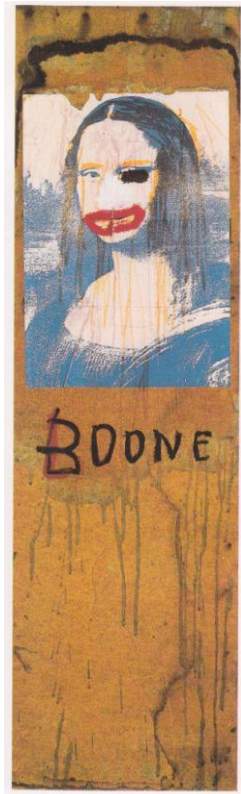
**Pl.55** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Riding with Death*, 1988  
Acrylic and oilstick on canvas, 249 x 289.5cm.  
Private collection



**Pl.56** Leonardo da Vinci, *Allegory of Envy*, 1483-85  
Pen and ink on paper, 21 x 29 cm.  
Oxford, Christ Church



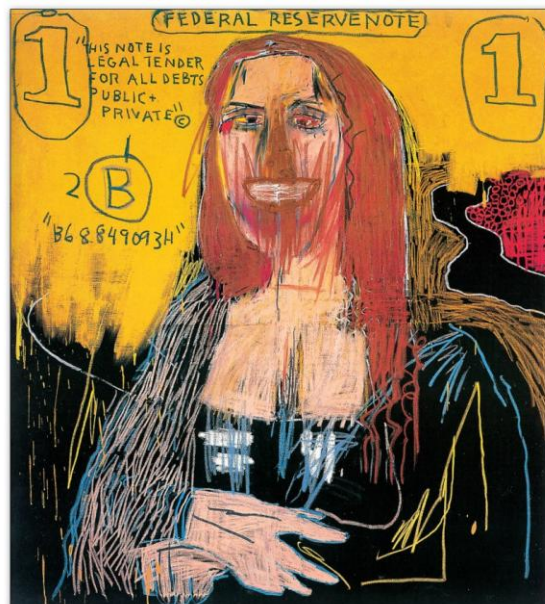
**Pl.57** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Leonardo da Vinci's Greatest Hits*, 1982  
Acrylic, oil paintstick and paper collage on canvas, four panels  
213.4 x 198cm overall  
Schorr Family Collection



**Pl.58** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Boone*, 1983  
Paper collage, felt pen and oilstick  
on hardboard, 104 x 30.5cm.  
Private collection

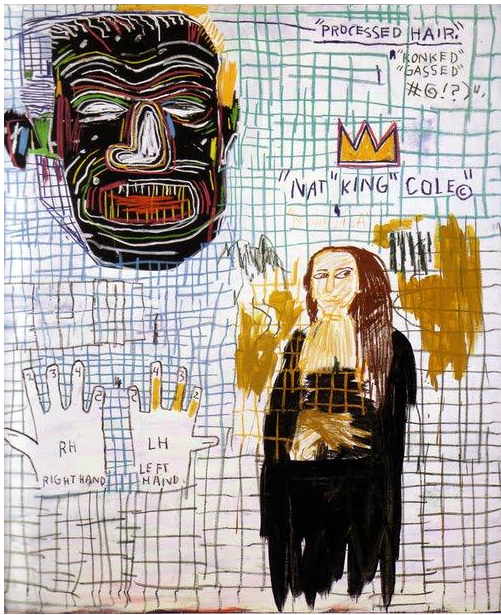


**Pl.59** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled*, 1983  
Acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas, 214 x 214cm.  
Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich



**Pl.60** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Mona Lisa*, 1983  
Acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas, 169.5 x 154.5cm  
Private collection





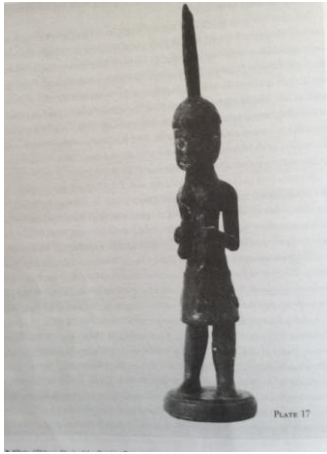
**Pl.61** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Lye*, 1983  
Acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas, 167.6 x 152.4cm  
Private collection



**Pl.62** Julian Schnabel, *Death*, 1981  
Oil on velvet, 244 x 216cm.  
Private collection



**Pl.63** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Exu*, 1988  
Acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas, 199 x 254cm.  
Private collection



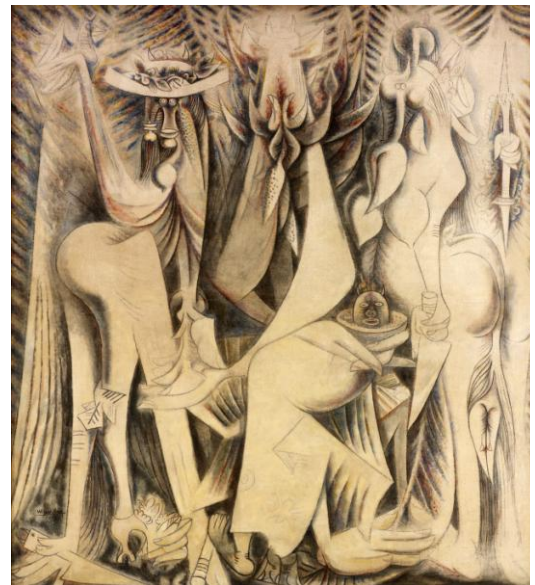
**Pl.64** African-Brazilian wood carving of Exu from Thompson, R.F. *Flash of the Spirit*, 1983



**Pl.65** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Antar*, 1985  
Acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas, 200 x 280 cm.  
Private collection

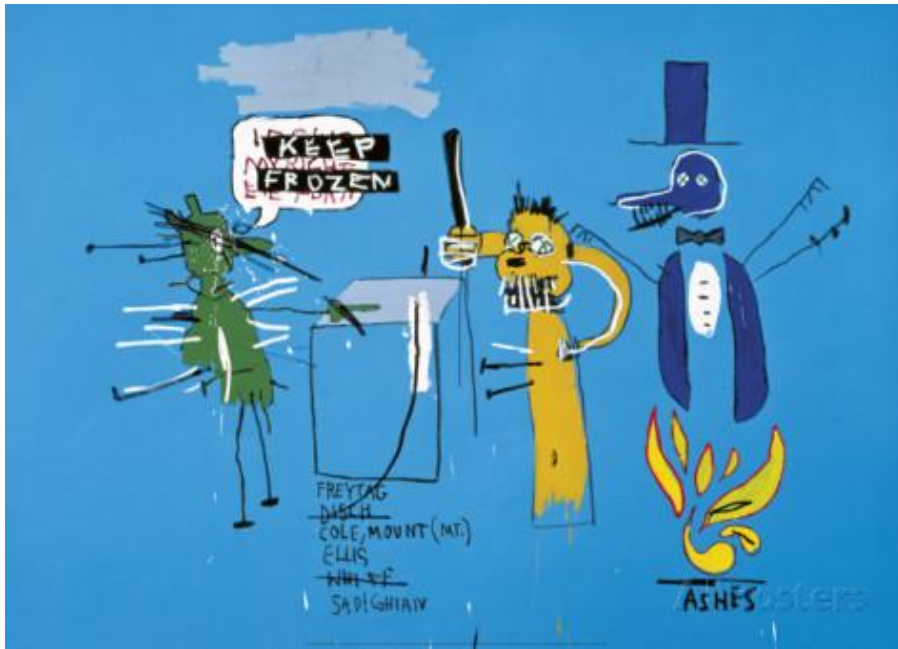


**Pl.66** Wifredo Lam, *Le Sombre Malembo (God of the Crossroads)*. 1943  
Oil on canvas, 136.4 x 153cm.  
MoMA



**Pl.67** Wifredo Lam, *The Eternal Present (Homage to Alejandro García Caturla)* 1944  
Oil on canvas, 216.5 x 196cm  
Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design





**Pl.68** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *The Dingoes That Park Their Brains with Their Gum*, 1988  
Acrylic and oilstick on linen, 254 x 289.5cm  
Private collection



**Pl.69** Jean-Michel Basquiat, *The Mechanics That Always Have a Gear Left Over*, 1988  
Acrylic and oilstick on linen, 254 x 289.6cm.  
Tony Shafrazi Gallery, NY.

## Conclusion

*'I don't think there really is an art world. There's a few good artists and then everything else is extra. I really don't think the art world exists I really don't think the art world exists. I mean there's people who like paintings and then there's dealers and there's people who work at the museum, but I don't think they're collectively an 'art world.'*

Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1985<sup>1</sup>

Much has been written about the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat during his lifetime and since his death in 1988. More has been written about the artist than about the art he created, and many who knew him, or knew of him, or who make a living in the art world that Basquiat considered to be unreal have shared their opinions concerning the life of this artist. In contrast, the objectives of this study have been twofold: to engage deeply and intensively with the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat, purely for the love of learning, and then to contribute original insight and new ideas to the current discourse on the art of this artist. At every stage of this research I have avoided inclusion of anecdotal information and remained focused on Basquiat's work as an artist. My research which is based upon detailed reading of the extant scholarship on Basquiat, together with primary and secondary analyses of his work, set against a wider consideration of art historical information, further develops arguments previously touched upon by both Thompson and Jones, in situating Basquiat within a global, multicultural context. I have interrogated this line of thinking through engagement with the critical theories of both Hall and Gilroy and this has allowed me to advance this transnational approach to a greater degree than previous scholars, for the first time resituating Basquiat's art within a global, post-black context which redefines previous racially absolute models of cultural critique. Specifically, by positioning Basquiat's work within the framework of Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* I have viewed the artist and his work through an original and broader lens.

My study of Gilroy's work in connection with Basquiat, inspired by the Tate Liverpool exhibition *Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic*, 2010 has been central to my thesis, and has provided an opportunity for me to articulate my reception of Basquiat's paintings from the other side of the Atlantic. Gilroy introduces his transcultural re-thinking of the African diaspora into the western hemisphere with a reference to J.M.W. Turner's 1840 painting *Slave Ship*, evoking the image of the ship as a *chronotope*; not merely a signifier of colonialism, commerce, and racial terror, linking British ports to the colonies, but also representative of the crossing of historic, cultural and political boundaries across the Atlantic. For Gilroy, the study of the past is not concerned with the recovery of 'hermetically sealed and culturally absolute racial traditions,' but instead offers an opportunity to consider the 'value of mutation, hybridity and intermixture en route to better theories... of black political culture.'<sup>2</sup> This thinking resonates with my interpretation of Basquiat's work which confronts stereotypical tropes and challenges established binaries, connecting histories, languages and cultures across continents in order to create a cathartic celebration of diversity which remains ideologically revolutionary to many today.

Central to my study is my demonstration of the way in which Basquiat the artist adopts the role of the griot, or storyteller, telling (his) story in art; interrogating the infinite processes of identity construction described by Hall, and negotiable within the context of Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* triangle. My detailed study of the compositional elements of Basquiat's work show

clearly the way in which Basquiat's visual narratives portray both the diversity and connectedness of Black Atlantic history, demonstrating the way in which the many narratives of these different histories from a shared starting point merge, cross and interlink across the Black Atlantic. As author Neil Gaimon describes in connection with his reworking of the traditional Anansi tales, 'Stories are webs. They are connected strand to strand.'<sup>3</sup>

This shifting, evolving construction of histories is personified in the changing nature of the griot; from African storyteller to Voudon deity, and my research interrogates and furthers the argument previously proposed by Jones concerning the artist's identification with the griot as an icon of mysticism; a protective talisman, demonstrating through new analyses of Basquiat's work, ways in which the artist visually and intellectually identified himself with this icon in his self-portraits and wove subtle references to the magic of Voudon into his paintings. Based on this inclusion of the magical, I have drawn original comparisons between the work of Basquiat and Lam, providing a new dimension to the reception of the work of both artists. This consideration of Basquiat's engagement with the mythical griot, or gri gri, which has been central to my research, acts as a hyperlink across continents and cultures, past and present, and is reflective of the hybridity which is unique and characteristic of Basquiat's art.

Basquiat's extensive body of work contains many paintings yet to be analysed in depth. As potentially new Basquiat paintings are frequently discovered, there is a definite requirement for art historians to be able to accurately recognise authentic Basquiat paintings, and for continued study of the artist's work. My study has provided significant new, detailed analyses of a number of paintings and my in-depth examination of Basquiat's work has enabled me to identify key elements of the artist's style, technique and key compositional elements. I have made original comparisons between the work of Basquiat and other artists including not only with those who went before him, but also with Ofili, thus acknowledging Basquiat's influence and broadening the scope of critique of his work. Furthermore, by locating Basquiat's work within the geographical cultural network of the Black Atlantic, I have been able to meaningfully engage with Black British cultural theorists such as Julien and Mercer, and also illustrate the way in which Basquiat influenced art and hip-hop culture in the city of Bristol, a port synonymous with Black Atlantic history, through the work of contemporary Bristol artist and musician Robert Del Naja, who has in turn been influential in creating art which transcends outmoded racially absolute boundaries.

Consistently situating Basquiat's *art* at the centre of my study my research demonstrates equal concerns with both formal analysis of the artist's paintings and consideration of the narratives within his compositions. Throughout my thesis I have examined Basquiat's work in relation to an art historical context and interrogated arguments put forward by previous scholars regarding the categorisation of this artist, remaining mindful of the artist's expressed desire not to be categorised. Whilst clearly arguing against labelling Basquiat a Black artist, a modernist, or a postmodernist, my study aligns his work with a post-black sensibility as set out by Saunders and Golden, offering a new dimension to previous scholarship. This alignment by its very nature negates categorisation and further demonstrates the relevance of Basquiat's work within the context of current artistic practice as well as providing a stimulus for future debate. Throughout the course of this study I have taken up opportunities to share my research with others and have been mindful of ways in which my own arguments might be constructive in encouraging further study. For example, the analysis of Basquiat's self-portraits within this thesis provoke further questions concerning stereotypical representation and the

fetishisation of the black male subject in art, and my analyses of Basquiat's various interpretations of the Mona Lisa provide a starting point for consideration of the way in which art might challenge contemporary Western notions of (white) female beauty – both of these are topics I myself am interested in investigating further. There remains a great deal of scope for further exploration of Basquiat's influence on contemporary practice in various artistic genres, his work as a writer and countless opportunities to follow trails of meaning contained within his numerous paintings.

Significantly, just as Basquiat claimed not to believe in the existence of the art world, the legacy of his significant contribution is not purely meaningful to a post-black art history or to art history in its broadest context, but is relevant as a powerful intellectual force within current discourse concerning social and racial justice in modern society. This continuous relevance based on Basquiat's ability to connect ancestry and modernity within an accessible, inclusive visual lexicon being one of the elements that make his work unique. Modern art is made and exists within the constructs of capitalism, and Basquiat's prolific career as an artist was acted out against the backdrop of 1980s uber-capitalist New York society. Yet much of Basquiat's work exposes the inequalities inherent within capitalism, and his narratives reflect the concerns of the street, rather than the concerns of the gallery.

On 18<sup>th</sup> May 2017 Basquiat's painting *Untitled*, 1982 (Pl. 70) a study of a human head, inscribed in multi-coloured layers of oilstick against a bright blue acrylic background embellished with characteristic skelley-courts and the deleted letters A-a - all characteristic of Basquiat's oeuvre, sold at Sotheby's, New York for the record breaking sum of \$110 million; an unprecedented price for work by an American artist at auction, and a price which places the value of Basquiat's work alongside that of Picasso. Whilst Basquiat never opened a bank account during his lifetime and had little interest in the commercial side of the art industry, he would no doubt have been pleased with this recognition. In 1986 Basquiat told Tamra Davis, 'I know so little about my career, to tell the truth. I don't know who has what or anything like that really, or even what they paid for it most of the time,'<sup>4</sup> yet almost thirty years after his death, Basquiat's vibrant and exuberant body of work continues to radically impact on a revised narrative of art history which demands the recognition of equality amongst diverse artistic traditions. Throughout the course of my research, my study of Basquiat's art has provided me with opportunities to engage with this inspirational artist as a learner, deepening my knowledge and understanding of ancestry and modernity, of music, art and literature, of colonial histories and their continued impact on society. The aim of this thesis is to share some of what I have learned and thus contribute to that recognition.





Pl.70 Jean Michel Basquiat, Untitled, 1982  
Acrylic, spray paint and oilstick on canvas, 182.2 x 173 cm.  
Private collection

## Notes

### Introduction

1. Basquiat, Jean-Michel. 'Illuminations; interview with Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat 1986' [Online]<http://www.illuminationsmedia.net> [1st October 2013]
2. Saggese, J.M. *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art*, California: University of California Press, 2014, p.6. Saggese states that these numbers are commonly accepted estimates. In January 2012, the Authentication Committee of the Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat announced that it would dissolve in September 2012 and no longer consider applications made thereafter, having been in existence for eighteen years and reviewed over 2,000 works of art. However, the committee did not publish a catalogue of works and owing to the way in which the artist casually disposed of art works during his lifetime, new potential Basquiat paintings continue to emerge. The estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat: [Online] <https://www.basquiat.worldsecuresystems.com>
3. Saggese, 2014 p.14.
4. Basquiat died on 12<sup>th</sup>. August, 1988 at the age of 27. The autopsy following his death reported that the cause of death was acute intoxication brought on by a combination of narcotic substances.
5. Mayer, M. 'Basquiat in History' In *Basquiat*. Exhibition catalogue by Mayer, M. *et al.*, New York: Merrell 2005 p.53
6. Jean-Michel Basquiat quoted in Geldzahler, H. 'Art: From Subways to SoHo, Jean-Michel Basquiat,' In Chiappini, R. (ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, Milan: Skira, 2005 p.40
7. The term *griot* is taken from the Mali culture of West Africa, where a griot is a storyteller who maintains the history and cultural identity of a people through oral and musical storytelling. In Hispanic cultures, including those of the Caribbean islands, from where Basquiat would trace his heritage, the *grillo* (Spanish spelling) takes on a talismanic identity, becoming a magical being or spirit, similar to the Exu, also depicted in Basquiat's work. The *gri-gri*, also represented within Basquiat's work, is emblematic of a Hoodoo charm.
8. Saggese, 2014 p.18 In her in-depth analysis of the way in which Basquiat resisted what he perceived as racist attempts to identify or categorise him by critics, Saggese quotes Suzanne Mallouk, Basquiat's partner during the early 1980s as saying, 'He would play with these black stereotypes and present himself in the form of threatening black stereotypes... to be subversive, to make people stare at their own racism in the face.'
9. Mayer, 2005 pp.41-57
10. Marshall, R. 'Repelling Ghosts' In Marshall, R. (ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, New York: Whitney 1993 p.50
11. Jones, K. 'Lost in Translation: Jean-Michel in the (Re) Mix' In Jones, K. (ed.) *EyeMinded*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011 pp. 277 – 296. Kellie Jones essay also discusses Basquiat's use of Spanish language, a theme which I shall develop in greater depth. Whilst it has been argued by Buchhart (in discussion with the author) that several of Basquiat's contemporaries state that he was not in fact bilingual in English and Puerto Rican Spanish, the author has decided to follow the scholarship of Thompson and Jones in relation to this point. Clearly, whilst his fluency is disputed, Basquiat was able to speak and write in Spanish, and Spanish language is commonly used in his paintings showing that the artist thought and expressed thought, at times, in Spanish.
12. Thompson, RF 'Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat,' In Marshall, R. (ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, New York: Whitney 1993 pp. 28-43.
13. Mosquera, G. 'Modernism from Afro-America: Wilfredo Lam' In Mosquera, G. (ed.) *Beyond Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, London: Institute of Visual Arts, 1995
14. Hall, S. 1996 & Evans, J. (ed.s) *Visual Culture: The Reader*, London: SAGE Publications, 1999
15. Saggese, 2014
16. Mayer, 2005 p 43
17. Greenberg, C. 'Modernist Painting' In Frascina, F. & Harrison, C. (eds.) *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, London: Harper & Rowe, 1982
18. Tate, G. 'Black like B.' In Marshall, R. (ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, New York: Whitney 1993 pp.55 – 60. In this essay Tate argues that it is not possible to discuss Basquiat's work without reference to 'white supremacy, and it's victimisation of him.'
19. Basquiat, Jean-Michel. 'Illuminations; interview with Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat 1986' [Online]<http://www.illuminationsmedia.net> [1st October 2013]
20. Golden, T. 'Post...' In *Freestyle*. Exhibition catalogue, Golden. T. New York Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001.
21. Hall, S. *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London: SAGE Publications, 1996
22. Fanon, F. 'On National Culture' In Fanon, F. *The Wretched of the Earth*: London, Penguin p.170
23. Spanish: translated into English as miscegenation or racial mixture, however, in Spanish it has a broader meaning, relating to a cultural hybridism in the widest sense, hence its use here.
24. Hall, S. 1996 & Evans, J. (ed.s) *Visual Culture: The Reader*, London: SAGE Publications, 1999
25. Gilroy, P. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London & New York: Verso, 1993 p.15.
26. Julien, I. & Mercer, K. 'De Margin and De Centre' In Morley, D. & Chen, K. (ed.s) *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London & New York: Routledge, 1996

27. Enwezor, O. 'The Vexations and Pleasures of Colour: Chris Ofili's 'Afromuses' and the Dialectic of Painting,' *In* Nesbitt, J.(ed.) 2010
28. Foster, H. (ed.) *Art Since 1900*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2004, p.661.
29. Saggese, 2014 pp 4-6
30. Flynt, H.A. 'Viewing SAMO© 1978 – 1979 [Online] <http://www.henryflynt.org> During 1979 Henry Flynt photographed the SAMO © graffiti in New York as it appeared and before the identity of the writers (Basquiat and Al Diaz) was known. Although the graffiti no longer exists, the collection of photographs is available online.
31. Cooper, M. & Chalfant, H. *Subway Art: Street Graphics, Street Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2009. During 1979 photographer Henry Chalfant extensively photographed street art in New York, capturing the emerging Wildstyle form of graffiti which is further documented in the 1983 film of the same title.
32. Basquiat, 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' interview with Demosthenes Davvetas, quoted in Saggese, 2014 p.41
33. Thompson, R.F. *Flash of the Spirit*, New York: Random House Inc., 1984 pp.28-44.
34. Hall, 1996 pp.411-449
35. Mosquera, G. 'Modernism from Afro-America: Wilfredo Lam' *In* Mosquera, G. (ed.) *Beyond Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, London: Institute of Visual Arts, 1995
36. Enwezor, O. 'Shattering the Mirror of Tradition: Chris Ofili's Triumph of Painting at the 50th Venice Biennale,' *In* Chris Ofili, New York: Rizzoli, 2009 p.142.
37. Ibid.
38. Clark, T.J., 'Arguments About Modernism: A Reply to Michael Fried' *In* Frascina, F. (ed.) *Pollock and After: the critical debate*, London: Harper & Rowe, 1985 pp.83 – 84.
39. *Basquiat*. Film. Dir. J. Schnabel. Brandt, P. 1996
40. Saggese, 2014 pp.136 - 137
41. The definition of the term 'storyteller' is simply defined as 'a person who tells stories,' (Oxford English Dictionary) and it is understood that storytelling can take various forms. Following further reading of texts focused directly upon postmodern narrative theory, e.g. Currie. M. *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (2<sup>nd</sup>. Edition) 1998, and Gibson, A. *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*, 1996, in consideration of whether it is necessary to explain in detail the title of this study in relation to postmodern narrative theory, it is the considered opinion of the author that this term does not require complication, being commonly understood. For example, the Saatchi Gallery biography of artist Tracey Emin states, 'Emin is a storyteller whose subject matter comes from (her) own rich life.' [www.saatchi-gallery.com](http://www.saatchi-gallery.com) [Online] 25.12.17. The meaning is clear to the reader. This thesis shows clearly the way in which Basquiat's subject matter provides a particular narrative of Black Atlantic histories, and this is situated within the theories of Hall and Gilroy.
42. Hall, S. 1996
43. Gilroy, 1993 p.2000-201 The term 'signification' used here refers to the practice within African American culture of using indirect language with covert meaning known only to those sharing the same culture, which originated amongst black slaves in the United States and was discussed at length by Henry Louis Gates in his text, *The Signifying Monkey*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. The term used here has no association with the same term used in the context of theories of art history.
44. Ibid.
45. Thompson, R.F. 1993 pp.28-44
46. Gilroy, P. *Joined-up Politics and Postcolonial Melancholia*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005

## **Chapter 1**

1. Jean-Michel Basquiat quoted in Saggese, J.M. *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art*, University of California Press: Los Angeles & London, 2014 pp.4-5
2. In this context the term 'tag' refers to a signature, or other identifying mark, used by a graffiti artist to identify his work. The term 'tag,' or 'throw-up' is also used to describe the least refined form of public graffiti, whereby writers merely apply their names or cryptic pseudonyms to public spaces in order to claim ownership of a particular territory.
3. Photographer Henry Flynt photographed sixty SAMO© writings during 1978 – '79. These were exhibited in 1991 and are now available online at [www.henryflynt.org/overviews/samo.htm](http://www.henryflynt.org/overviews/samo.htm)
4. During the 1970s, the Wild Style crew comprised over 500 members, painting in the Bronx, New York. The graffiti style adopted by the crew, formed of intricate, interwoven 'masterpiece' signatures made up of stylised letters and symbols, each unique in style, eventually became synonymous with the term 'wildstyle.' This form of graffiti is commonly used today to decorate a range of merchandise.
5. *Wild Style*. Film. Dir. Charlie Ahearn. Submarine Entertainment. 1982.
6. SAMO graffiti, New York 1978, 'SAMO AS AN END TO MEDIOCRE ART,' [www.henryflynt.org/overviews/samo.htm](http://www.henryflynt.org/overviews/samo.htm) [Online] 3 March 2015
7. *TV Party*, hosted by Glenn O'Brien cable access television show, 1979 [Online] <http://www.youtube.com> [4<sup>th</sup> April 2014]
8. Sirmans, F. 'Chronology' *In* Burchhart, D. *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Now's the Time*, New York: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2015 p. 216

9. Jean-Michel Basquiat interviewed in 1985 In *Jean-Michel Basquiat: the Radiant Child*. Film. Dir. Tamra Davis. Arthouse Films, 2010.
10. The single *Beat – Bop* was the only record produced by Tar Town Record Company, established by Basquiat in 1983, and featured the rap lyrics of Ramellzee and K- Rob. The record was used as the title track for Henry Chalfont's 1983 documentary on early hip-hop, *Style Wars*. Basquiat designed the record cover for the 12 inch single, and due to the limited number of 500 pressings, copies of the record have become highly prized.
11. The term 'New Wave' was coined by Malcolm McLaren during the late 1970s – early '80s to describe a genre of synthetic pop music by bands such as Blondie, influenced in part by 1970s punk rock. The rise of the genre was concurrent with the establishment of MTV, an American television channel which showed music videos, and hence the genre also influenced fashion and the arts, particularly in New York, during this period.
12. *Downtown '81*. Film. Dir. Edo Bertoglio. Maripol, 2001. See also Appendix 1 Fig. 2
13. Basquiat, J.M. quoted in Geldzahler, H. 'Art: From Subways to SoHo, Jean-Michel Basquiat' In Chiappini, R. (ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, Milan: Skira, 2005 p.34
14. Ricard, R. 'The Radiant Child,' *Artforum magazine*, December 1981, pp35-43.
15. Glueck, G. "On Canvas, Yes, But Still Eyesores," *New York Times*, December 25, 1983, p22.
16. Marx, K. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Penguin Books, 1973 p.92. & Marx, K. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol.3*, Engels, F. (ed.) [Online] <http://www.econlib.org/library/YPDBooks/Marx> [10 April 2014]
17. Edwards, S. *Art and its Histories: A Reader*, Yale University Press/Open University, 1999. Edwards refers to the single, or grand narrative of evolutionary progress structured around individual artists, or art movements, in his definition of the canon of western art history, a 'schema of presentation' within which all works of art are positioned. Influenced by conceptual frameworks, and intellectual stances, this exclusive canon has traditionally been constructed by academics, and challenged in recent times by postmodernism and contemporary art practice. The radicalisation of academia during the 1960s led to a re-evaluation of the role of the canon, influenced by marxist thinking which questioned the ideological role of art in society, challenging the traditional view that art was above social and political interests, and claiming the canon as a form of ideological control, because the ownership of artistic output is governed by monetary values. As the art market equates canonical pedigree with financial value, and is based upon the notion of individual inherent genius, what is really on sale is the artistic personality; hence the commodification of art is linked to the commodification of the artist.
18. Saggese, 2014 pp.4-5
19. Basquiat, J.M. in interview with Marc H. Miller, The Fun Gallery, 1983 [Online] [www.98bowery.com](http://www.98bowery.com) [19.5.2017]
20. Forgacs, D. *The Gramsci Reader: selected writings 1916-1935*, New York: NYU Press, 2000
21. Hall, S. *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London: SAGE Publications, 1996
22. Oliva, A.B. 'The Perennial Shadow of Art in Basquiat's Brief Life,' In *Basquiat*, Chiappini, R. (ed.) Milan: Skira, 2005 Oliva discusses the way in which Debord took this idea further, arguing that the dominant classes control spectacle and in this context, spectacle is controlled by the state, working to reproduce social divisions and class formations. He questions the extent to which art is complicit with capitalist power structures or can work to undermine them.
23. The term 'graffiti' used to describe unofficial mark making on public walls originates from the Italian verb *sgraffire*; the process whereby layers of plaster are superimposed upon a wall, and marks scratched into the final damp surface. The term graffiti was first used in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century by archaeologist Raffaele Garucci to describe the inscriptions found on walls in the ancient city of Pompeii, and considering the history of both the term and practice of graffiti, it seems essential to the very nature of the practice, that it should remain outside of the constraints of the establishment.
24. Hebdige, D. Welcome to the Terrordome: Jean-Michel Basquiat and the 'Dark' Side of Hybridity In Marshall, R. (Ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, New York: Whitney-Abrams, 1993 p. 68
25. Saggese 2014, p.4
26. Hughes, R. 'Requiem for a Featherweight: the Sad Story of an Artist's Success,' *New Republic* 199 no.21 (November, 1988) p.33
27. Burchhart, D. 'Basquiat's Notebooks: Words and Knowledge, Scratched and Sampled' In Burchhart, D. (ed.) *Basquiat the Unknown Notebooks*, New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications Inc. 2015 p.31
28. Burchhart, D. 2015 p.38
29. Geldzahler, H. 'Art: From Subways to SoHo Jean-Michel Basquiat,' In *Jean –Michel Basquiat*, Chiappini, R. (ed.) Milan: Skira 2005 p33. Although Basquiat also states in this interview, that at the time of writing the SAMO© graffiti he was not thinking about breaking in to the art world, but just of critiquing gallery art, Geldzahler reminds him that, recognising him as an art critic, he had in fact approached him in a restaurant, attempting to sell postcard sized works.
30. Tate, G. 'Nobody Loves a Genius Child: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Flyboy in the Buttermilk' In *Jean- Michel Basquiat the Notebooks*, Warsh, L. (ed.) New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1993 p.46
31. Basquiat quoted in interview in Thompson, R.F. 'Royalty, Heroism and the Streets,' In *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, Marshall, R. (Ed.) New York: Whitney-Abrams, 1993 p42

32. Gerard Basquiat quoted in Sirmans, F.M. 'Chronology' In Marshall, R. (Ed.) Jean-Michel Basquiat, New York: Whitney-Abrams, 1993 p. 250
33. Basquiat quoted in Sirmans, 1993 p.250
34. Basquiat quoted in interview in Geldzahler, H. 2005, p.42
35. Adams, B. 'Expatriate Dreams' In Art in America, February 1995[Online] [http://www.cytwombly.info/twombly\\_writings1.htm](http://www.cytwombly.info/twombly_writings1.htm) [3 March 2015]
36. Szeemann, H. Cy Twombly: An Appreciation, Whitechapel Gallery, 2008 [Online] [www.cytwombly.info/twombly\\_writings1.htm](http://www.cytwombly.info/twombly_writings1.htm) [22 March 2015]
37. Armand, L. Fifty Years of Works on Paper, 2004 [Online] [www.cytwombly.info/twombly\\_writings1.htm](http://www.cytwombly.info/twombly_writings1.htm) [22 March 2015] Armand's essay provides a critique of Krauss and Bois' treatment of Twombly within their seminal text, *Formless: a user's guide* 1997. Indeed within the 2004 text, *art since 1900*, the authors continue to describe Twombly in this manner.
38. Hoffman, F. 'The Defining Years: Notes on Five Key Works' In Basquiat, Mayer, M. (ed.) New York: Merrell, 2005 p.129 - 162
39. Nosei, Annina. 'Annina Nosei/New York, March 2011 [Online] <https://vimeo.com/21566156> [21 July 2015]
40. Nosei, Annina. 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: Graffiti and Glory,' The New School Public debate, 2012 [Online] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QNqKRV2Qak> [30 April 2015]
41. McGuigan, C. 'New Art, New Money, [Online]<http://www.newyorktimes.com> [21 July 2015]
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Hoban, P. Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art, London: Quartet Books, 2008
45. Hofmann, 2005 p.133
46. Sirmans, 1993 p.243
47. [Online] <http://www.thebroad.org> [15 March 2015]
48. Deitch, J. 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: Anina Nosei' In Flash Art 16, (May 1982) p.50
49. hooks, b. 'Altars of Sacrifice: Re-Membering Basquiat,' Art in America 81, no. 6 (June 1993) quoted in Saggese, 2014 p.6
50. Basquiat quoted in Caprile, L. 'Jean-Michel Basquiat. The Word and the Image,' In Chiappini, R (ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, Italy: Skira, 2005 p.119

## **Chapter 2**

1. Basquiat, Jean-Michel. 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: the Radiant Child.' Film. Dir. Tamra Davis. Arthouse Films, 2010
2. Thompson, Robert Farris. 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: the Radiant Child.' Film. Dir. Tamra Davis. Arthouse Films, 2010
3. Saggese, J.M. *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art*, University of California Press: Los Angeles & London, 2014 p.6
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid
6. Saggese, J.M. 2014 p.14
7. Saggese, J.M. 2014 p.16
8. Ibid. Saggese qualifies this by pointing out that during his lifetime, Basquiat's work, unlike that of many of his contemporaries, was never shown in a large solo show in a New York museum. However, of the other artists included with Basquiat in the 1983 Biennial at the Whitney Museum: the work of Keith Haring was also not exhibited in a solo show at a New York museum until after the artist's death; solo shows for both Cindy Sherman and David Salle were exhibited at the Whitney Museum in 1987 and again at the Whitney Museum for Barbara Kruger in 2000. Basquiat's work was first exhibited in a solo show at the Whitney Museum in 1992, making it reasonable to suggest that, had Basquiat not died in 1988, he may well have seen his work exhibited in a New York museum.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. It seems highly likely that Basquiat would have been aware of the Jacob Lawrence retrospective exhibited in the Brooklyn Museum, and may have failed to correct the interviewer's perception of him out of a sense of pride. However, as Basquiat's work was being exhibited in so many shows in large cities around the world during the early 1980s, he may not have taken note of the exhibition in Pennsylvania, which would not have attracted a great deal of publicity, being located in a university outside of New York. Basquiat was extremely ambitious and part of an elitist international art world focused around major galleries and cities.
12. Saggese, Jordana Moore. 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child Panel Discussion, UC Berkeley, May 15, 2014 [Online] [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxW\\_2VtZ7A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxW_2VtZ7A) [12<sup>th</sup> August 2015] This panel discussion of Tamra Davis' film is led by Saggese, Jennifer A. Gonzalez and Lewis Watts. The discussion is largely concerned with issues relating to racialised aspects of Basquiat's career as an artist, in what

- Gonzalez describes as 'a space of deep hostility.' Whilst expressing concern that the artist's 'racialised status remains operative' in the discussion of his work by those in the film, the members of the panel continually categorise those individuals in the film on the basis of race. The discussion foregrounds an important difference in the way American scholars categorise individuals according to racial heritage; at one point in the discussion, a member of the audience describes Basquiat as 'an immigrant' in a question regarding the artist's sense of identity. In responding, Saggese fails to correct this labelling, and replies that Basquiat would have identified as an immigrant, but was located by others as an African-American. To a British scholar, Basquiat, who was born and lived all his life in the USA, would be described as an American, despite the fact that his father was a Haitian migrant and his mother an American born in the USA to Puerto Rican migrant parents.
13. Mercer, K. 'Welcome to the Jungle,' New York & London: Routledge, 1994
  14. Mercer, K. 1994 p. 234
  15. Geldzahler H, 'Art: From Subways to SoHo, Jean-Michel Basquiat' In Chiappini, R. (ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, Milan: Skira, 2005 p.40
  16. Basquiat, G. 'Gérard Basquiat In His Own Words' In *Jean-Michel Basquiat 1981: The Studio of the Street*. Exhibition catalogue by Deitch, J., Sirmans, F. & Vassell, N. (ed.s) New York: Deitch Projects, 2007
  17. Saggese, J.M. 2014 p.15
  18. Ibid.
  19. Saggese, J.M. 2014 p.22 Saggese refers to Driskell, D.C. *Two Centuries of Black American Art*, 1976, English, D. *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, 2007 and Francis, J. *Bearden's Hands*, 2011
  20. Basquiat, Jean-Michel. 'Illuminations; interview with Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat 1986' [Online]<http://www.illuminationsmedia.net> [1st October 2013]
  21. Barson, T. 'Introduction: Modernism and the Black Atlantic' In Barson, T. & Gorschlüter, P. (eds.) *Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic*, Liverpool: Tate Publishing, 2010 p.8
  22. Foster, H. Krauss, R. Bois, Y-A. Buchloh, B.H.D. & Joselit, D. (eds.) *Art Since 1900*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2004 p.64
  23. Antliff, A. & Leighton, P. 'Primitive' In Nelson, R.S. & Shiff, R. (ed.s) *Critical Terms for Art History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003 p.228
  24. Gilroy, P. 'Modern Tones' In Skipwith, J. (ed.) *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, London: Haywood Gallery, 1997 p.104
  25. Archer, P. 'Negrophilia, Diaspora and Moments of Crisis' In Barson, T. & Gorschlüter, P. (eds.) 2010 p30
  26. Richardson, J. *A Life of Picasso Volume 2, 1907 – 1917*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1996 p.23 In Chapter 3 I will further develop this theme in relation to Basquiat's similar faith in the alchemy of icons and artefacts, as illustrated in his development of the griot motif in his work.
  27. Ibid.
  28. Staller, N. *A Sum of Destructions: Picasso's Cultures and the Creation of Cubism*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005 p.248
  29. Richardson, J. 1996 p.24. Richardson recounts the story of how Picasso came to possess the Iberian heads, stolen from the Louvre by an acquaintance, and kept them for several years before being forced to return them.
  30. Ibid.
  31. Ibid.
  32. Paintings for example; *Nu à la draperie*, 1907, *Dancer*, 1907. In 1912 Picasso purchased more African masks whilst visiting Marseilles with fellow artist Georges Braque. The cylindrical attached eyes of these were to influence his inclusion of raised cylindrical holes in his mixed media constructions, for example *Guitar*, 1912-13
  33. An example of this popular fetishising of the black subject is to be found in studies of the life and work of African American dancer, Josephine Baker, who became a popular celebrity in Paris but whose roles commonly depicted her as a sexually provocative, and uncivilised jungle dweller clad in a skirt of bananas. See for example Barnwell, A.D. 'Like the Gypsy's Daughter or Beyond the Potency of Josephine Baker's Eroticism' In Skipwith, J. (ed.) 1997 pp. 82 - 90
  34. Richardson, J. 1996 p.244 The Spanish Civil War came to an end in 1939 with Franco's Nationalist army defeating the left-wing Republicans. Picasso, an exiled left wing sympathiser from the Republican stronghold of Malaga, represented the Republican Spanish, particularly following the success of his 1937 painting *Guernica*. Richardson suggests that in this context, Picasso may have felt it important to suggest that *Les Femmes d'Alger* had been solely inspired by Spanish influences, unlike any other known painting of the time. However, the artist's sketchbooks, sold upon his completion of the work, and the writings of Picasso's friend Gertrude Stein, show that he visited the museum on numerous occasions whilst working on the painting, and this led to his reworking the faces of the figures on the left of the canvas.
  35. Thompson, R.F. *Flash of the Spirit*, New York: Random House Inc., 1984
  36. Martin, C.J. 'They've All Got Painting: Frank Bowling's Modernity and the Post-1960 Atlantic' In Barson, T. & Gorschlüter, P. (eds.) 2010. p.49
  37. Ibid
  38. Ibid.

39. Powell, R.J. 'Re/Birth of a Nation' *In* Skipwith, J. (ed.) 1997 p29. Whilst I have not directly quoted Powell, my argument is derived from his description of Africa as 'fodder for ... France's appetite for validating, appropriating and reinterpreting world culture.'
40. Whilst Du Bois and Locke were keen to establish the place of black Americans as equal citizens in America, other activists such as Marcus Garvey, who moved to Harlem from Jamaica in 1916, and was a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance, did not subscribe to the view that the African American experience was integral to the broader American experience. Garvey founded the Black Star Line shipping company in 1919 closely linked to Back to Africa movement which called for 'repatriation' of all peoples of African heritage.
41. Powell, R.J. 1997 p. 29
42. Barson, T. 2010 p10
43. Staller, N. 2005 p.80
44. Saggese, J.M. 2014 pp 20-21. Saggese references Douglas' *Poster of the Krigwa Players, Little Negro Theater of Harlem*, 1926 discussing the similar way in which Douglas references African iconography whilst engaging a European modernist style, which she argues Basquiat must have found interesting. Later she refers to Douglas' incorporation of jazz into his illustrations, as an emblem of African American culture, a trope also deployed by Basquiat.
45. Earle, S. 'Harlem, Modernism, and Beyond: Aaron Douglas and His Role in Art History' *In* Earle, S. (ed.) *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007 p.12
46. During the inter-war years the WPA (Works Progress Administration) Federal Arts Project provided a basic salary to artists commissioned to decorate public buildings with mural paintings.
47. Earle, S. 2007 p.23. Earle notes that Douglas admired the work of Covarrubias, and draws comparisons between the work of both illustrators, referencing Covarrubias' illustration, *Lindy Hop*, 1936 which like Douglas' work features black music and dance.
48. See for example; O'Keefe, Georgia, *Radiator Building, Night, New York*, 1927.
49. See for example; Klee, Paul, *Three Towers*, 1923
50. Earle, S. 2007 p.62
51. Saggese, J.M. 2014 p38. In her analysis of this painting, Saggese also notes the connection to Basquiat's use of the word SALT here, with a caption that appeared in the catalogue for the Brooklyn Museum's exhibition Akhenaton and Nefertiti, 1973 identifying the owner of an artefact as Henry Salt, Memphis. This shows the way Basquiat referred to the museum's exhibits and archives to inform his work. His double entendre further demonstrating the way he concealed meaning within his work.
52. Marshall, R. 'Repelling Ghosts' *In* Marshall, R. (ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, New York: Whitney, 1993 pp.15-27. In this essay Marshall describes how Brian Gormley, artist and friend of Basquiat's, made note of books Basquiat used as frequent references. These included *African Rock Art*, by Burchard Brenjes. Marshall demonstrates the similarity in several of the illustrations in this book to motifs used by Basquiat in his paintings, including the sickle shaped boats seen here.
53. Driskell, D.C. 'Some Observations on Aaron Douglas as Tastemaker in the Renaissance Movement' *In* Earle, S. 2007 p 90
54. Barson, T. 2012 p.12
55. Later, in 1985 Robert Farris Thompson contributed an essay, 'Activating Heaven: The Incantatory Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat' to the catalogue of Basquiat's exhibition at the Mary Boone Gallery, in which he described Basquiat as the 'spiritual brother' of Douglas. Basquiat would undoubtedly have read this, and may well have researched Douglas. However, the differences in both the style and purpose of the work of these artists, together with the previously noted observation that Basquiat would most probably have referenced the work of other artists based on the materiality of their art, not their ethnicity, make it unremarkable that Basquiat did not discuss Douglas' work, or the work of other painters of the Harlem Renaissance, in relation to his own. As Basquiat mixed in multi-ethnic circles, he may not have endorsed the Harlem Renaissance focus on an exclusively black aesthetic. Interview footage shows Basquiat to be courteous and reserved, described by his father as being shy, a quiet man; therefore it is likely to surmise that he chose only to discuss the work of those artists he most admired.
56. Saggese, J.M. 2014 p.22
57. Gilroy, P. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso, 1993 p.15
58. Ibid
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid p. 19. At the time of Gilroy's writing the city of Bristol, a key trade centre and port of the Atlantic slave trade, had developed into a vibrant multiethnic community and scene of artistic creativity. Together with graffiti art, the Bristol music scene was revitalised by the music of Massive Attack, a local band comprised of artists, DJs and musicians, who pushed Soul II Soul's creative integrations further. Massive Attack's 1990 record *Unfinished Sympathy* features an orchestral arrangement mixed with vocal and percussive samples that merge global boundaries, and the film shot to accompany the record accentuates postmodern urban diversity. The music of Massive Attack draws from and mixes art forms from numerous ethnic heritages, which are all part of the unifying culture of Bristol.
61. Thompson R.F. *Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat*, ' *In* Marshall, R. (ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, New York: Whitney 1993 p.30



62. Basquiat, Jean-Michel. 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: the Radiant Child.' Film. Dir. Tamra Davis. Arthouse Films, 2010
63. Ibid. It is easy to imagine Basquiat, who had himself repeatedly run away from home as a boy, camping out in the parks of New York, relishing the adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn.
64. Basquiat, Jean-Michel quoted in Saggese, J.M. 2014 p.7
65. None of Basquiat's paintings are known to have been x-rayed, although this process would no doubt reveal an interesting insight into the conceptual processes the artist worked through.
66. The Spanish 'el ratón' is literally translated into English to mean 'a mouse' however, Basquiat's drawings which accompany this frequently used inscription suggest that he uses the term to mean 'a rat.' In this context, I read this inscription in reference to Duvalier, as the term 'rat' is also used to denote a cheat or character of low morals. Basquiat's father expressed an understandably antagonistic view of Haiti and Jean-Michel may well have shared this view. In the earlier use of the drawing PPCD, 1982-83, Basquiat twice inscribes the word Brooklyn© below the head, linking the image of Duvalier with his home.
67. Fishkin, S. F. *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African American Voices*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. Whilst Twain's literary work is often considered controversial due to the inclusion of racist language and depiction of black characters, Fishkin argues that critics have failed to recognise the African American voice central to the work. Claiming that the vernacular dialect, rhythm and syntax of speech embedded within the voice of the narrator Huck Finn was modelled on a black child, Fishkin suggests that Twain's work provided 'a voice' for black Americans.
68. Sirmans, F. (ed.) *Basquiat and the Bayou*, New Orleans: Del Monico Books/Prestel Publishing, 2014 p.15. In 2015 the Ogden Museum of Modern Art, New Orleans presented an exhibition of Basquiat's work inspired by the Deep South, *Basquiat and the Bayou*. The exhibition was curated by Franklin Sirmans (also author of the accurate chronicle of the artist's life, featured in most publications on the artist). Basquiat, a jazz aficionado, visited the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival with fellow artist Ouattarra Watts a few months before his death in 1988. This was the only time Basquiat visited the Southern states.
69. Hoban, P. *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art*, America: Quartet Books, 1998 p.18
70. Hills, P. 'Cultural Legacies and the Transformation of the Cubist Collage Aesthetic by Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and Other African-American Artists' In Fine, R. & Francis, J. (ed.s) Romare Bearden, American Modernist, Newhaven & London: Yale University Press, 2011 pp.224-225
71. Francis, J. 'Bearden's Hands' In Fine, R. & Francis, J. (ed.s) 2011 p.123
72. Francis, J. 2011 p.127
73. Ibid.
74. Francis, J. 2011 p.134
75. Francis, J. 2011 p.130
76. *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980. Judges Ch. 16 pp.240-241
77. Fishkin, F.S. 1993 p.61 Fishkin discusses Twain's understanding and appreciation of the typically black concept of *signifyin* – that is, using language specifically so that the meaning goes beyond the literal interpretation, and describes how this originated in the Deep South in response to the slaves' understanding that the white plantation owners and church ministers often misconstrued Biblical meaning in order to validate subjugation. African American writer Toni Morrison also makes use of this idiom in her writing which focuses on the experience of the African American during slavery days. Basquiat's use of this will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.
78. Marshall, R. 'Repelling Ghosts' In Marshall, R. (ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, New York: Whitney, 1993 pp.17-19. In this essay Marshall examines the way Basquiat's work draws upon the influences of Western modern art history. Marshall compares Basquiat's *Untitled*, 1982 with Dubuffet's *Pisseur à Droite X*, 1961, Both drawings are rendered in a similar style, and Basquiat's *Pater*, 1982, which Marshall compares to Picasso's *Homme assis*, 1971 also draws on the earlier *Untitled* drawing of 1981.
79. Francis, J. 2011 p.28
80. Saunders, R. 'Black is a Color' [Online] <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug01/westkaemper/callaloo/gallery6> [24 August 1915]
81. Basquiat, Jean-Michel. 'Illuminations; interview with Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat 1986' [Online]<http://www.illuminationsmedia.net> [1st October 2013]
82. Francis, J. 2011 p.28
83. Mercer, K. 1994
84. Magdalyn Asimakis quoted in Lee, J. 'Outstretched: A retrospective with Contemporary Insight' [Online] <http://fillermagazine.com/culture/gallery/museum-gallery-exhibits-torontos-ago-presents-jean-michel-basquiat-nows-time> [28 August 1915] Magdalyn Asimakis, curator at the AGO, Toronto worked to co-curate the 2014 exhibition, *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Now's the Time* with Dieter Buchhart.

## Chapter 3

1. Basquiat, Jean-Michel quoted in interview with Demosthenes Davvetas, published 1988 from Saggese 2014 p.41. Basquiat did travel to Abidjan, West Africa in 1986.
2. Basquiat, Jean-Michel interviewed by Marc Miller, 1982 quoted in O'Meally, R.G. 'King of the Zulu: Basquiat, Bearden and Armstrong' In Sirmans, F. (ed.) *Basquiat and the Bayou*, New York: Prestel, 2014 p.39
3. This definition of 'appropriation' is discussed in Foster, H. Et al 2011 p.661 - 662
4. Martin, C.J. 2010 p.49. The author recognises that the Fan masks used as source material by Picasso are believed to have been created as functional, as well as aesthetic, objects. Whilst Picasso's focus was based largely on the aesthetic qualities of these objects, he was aware of their functionality as fetishes of power, and as this chapter shows, Basquiat also aware of this duality in his treatment of the grillo.
5. Ibid. In fact, the aesthetic connection between Africa and Spain was firmly established long before Picasso looked back to Africa for inspiration. In 237 BC Spain was conquered by Carthage (now Tunisia) and in 218BC, when Hannibal famously attempted to defend Spain against the Roman Empire, his army of sixty thousand was comprised of both Spanish and African soldiers. Following periods of colonisation by the Romans, Vandals, Byzantines and Visigoths, Spain again came under North African rule from the eighth century, when the Caliphate conquered the country, to around 1487. During this period of Islamic rule, Picasso's birthplace, Malaga, became a prominent trade centre, and the legacy of Arabic rule can be seen today in the architecture, language and culture of the city. Clearly, on the Mediterranean shores of the Atlantic, African and European cultural histories became intertwined long ago.
6. Gilroy, P. 1993 p.15
7. Ibid.
8. Jones, K. 2005 pp.143-179
9. Hoban, P. 1998 pp.208-209
10. Haley, A. *Roots*, Great Britain: Hutchinson, 1977 p.viii
11. Haley, A. 1977 p.37 Basquiat, who as previously noted, claimed to have grown up influenced by television, may well have first encountered the griot in the televised version of Haley's work.
12. Richardson, J. 1996 p.23
13. Thompson, R.F. 1993 p.31
14. Thompson, R.F. 'Three Works by Basquiat' In Sirmans, F. (ed.) *Basquiat and the Bayou*, New Orleans: Prospect New Orleans & Del Monico Books, 2014 p.32
15. Thompson, R.F. 1983
16. Thompson, R.F. 1983 pp.3-16
17. Thompson, R.F. 1983 p.13
18. Thompson, R.F. 1983 p.16
19. Thompson, R.F. 1983 p.18
20. Thompson, R.F. 2014 p.35
21. Saggese, J.M. 2014 p. 7. Although Suzanne Mallouk, Basquiat's girlfriend between 1980 – '82 is reported to have claimed that, '*Jean-Michel never reads*,' (noted by Jennifer Clement in her loosely biographical narrative of Mallouk's relationship with Basquiat, *Widow Basquiat*, 2000 p.54, Basquiat's father Gérard told Thompson during a telephone interview that from an early age Jean-Michel '*read tremendously*.' Thompson, R.F. 1983 p.29. Gérard Basquiat's claim is supported by Basquiat's filmed discussion with Tamra Davis, 1985 on the topic of literature, and Saggese's detailed study of the influence of the Beat writers on Basquiat.
22. This is the definition of cultural memory used throughout this text. Whilst it is recognised that much scholarship focuses upon deeper consideration of this subject, for the purposes of this study, the term is relevant only in relation to the way it is used by the artist.
23. Thompson, R.F. 1983 p.36
24. As has been previously illustrated, Basquiat acquired knowledge and inspiration from books. Within Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit*, Basquiat found inspiration for the original 1983 depictions of the griot within the ornately decorated image of the Nimm woman. The artist is also known to have used Burchard Brentje's 1969 publication, *African Rock Art* . Richard Marshall notes that, within this text, the Dende-marò rock painting depicting the figure of a queen provides the source of Basquiat 's painting *Pharynx*, 1985
25. See Chapter 2, note 40
26. Hoban, P. 1998 p.177
27. Thompson, R.F. 1984 p.234
28. Ibid.
29. Thompson, R.F. 'In Search of the Essence of Meaning: Translating Basquiat's Art' In Jean-Michel Basquiat, Exhibition catalogue by Florio, E. (ed.) New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2013 p.11
30. Thompson, R.F. 1983 p.245
31. Dreyfuss, H. *Symbol Sourcebook: An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982

32. Jones, K. 2005 pp.143-179
33. Jones, K.2005 p.154
34. Jones, K.2005 p.172
35. Foster, H. Krauss, R. Bois, Y-A. Buchloh, B.H.D. & Joselit, D. (eds.) 2004 pp.661-662
36. Mercer, K. 1996 p.450
37. Jones, K.2005 p. 165
38. Jones, K.2005 p. 166
39. Jones, K. 2005 p.167
40. Saggese, J.M. 2014 pp.42 & 50
41. Jones, K. 2005 p.172
42. Thompson, R.F. 1983 p.251
43. Jones, K. 2005 p.173
44. Thompson, R.F. 'Royalty, Heroism and the Street: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat,' *In* Marshall, R. (ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, New York: Whitney, 1993 p.36
45. Thompson, R.F. 1983 p.22
46. Chapter 5 will focus upon analysis of three final paintings including *Exu*, 1988, Basquiat's study of the orisha.
47. Jones, K. 2005 p.173. Further examples of paintings created in 1984 which include the silhouetted griot form include *Zydeco*, *The Bicycle Man*, and *China*, a collaborative work with Warhol. The artist also applied this stylistic technique to a 1983 *Self Portrait*, which will be discussed in Chapter 4.
48. Clemente. J. 2000 p.68
49. Thompson, R.F. 1993 p.32
50. Basquiat, J.M. quoted in Geldzhaler, H. 2005 p.40
51. Clemente. J. 2000 p.94
52. Mayer, M 2005 p.51
53. Jones, K. 2005 p.173
54. Mosquera, G. 'Modernism from Afro-America: Wilfredo Lam' *In* Mosquera, G. (ed.) *Beyond Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996) pp. 121-132
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Hall, S. 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora,' *In* Rutherford, J. *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990 p.234
59. Thompson, R.F. 1993 p.33
60. Sotheby's auction catalogue [Online]  
<http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2014/contemporary-art-evening-auction-l14020/lot.36.html#> [10.1.16]
61. Jones, K. 2005 p.166
62. Jones, K. 2005 p.174. Jones ascribes this term and it's definition to Mirzoeff, N. 'The Multiple Viewpoint: Diaspora and Visual Culture,' *In* Mirzoeff N., *The Visual Culture Reader*, London: Routledge, 2002
63. A Milagro is a stamped metal charm, common in Latin America and the Spanish islands. They usually depict body parts and are offered to saints with prayers for healing.
64. Jazz musician Parker, nicknamed 'The Bird,' was one of Basquiat's musical heroes and multiple references to Parker are to be found in many of the artist's works.
65. Gilroy, P. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso, 1993 p.16
66. Del Naja, R. 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Street Art Inspiration for Massive Attack,' article in *The Guardian*, 14 October 2013[Online][www.guardian.com](http://www.guardian.com) [20.2.16]
67. Ibid
68. Del Naja, R. & Bidder, S. *3D & the art of massive attack*, London: vinyl factory publishing, 2015

## **Chapter 4**

1. Basquiat, Jean-Michel. 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: the Radiant Child.' Film. Dir. Tamra Davis. Arthouse Films, 2010
2. Fisher, J. 'The Other Story and the Past Imperfect,' Tate papers no.12 [Online][www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk) [19.5.17]
3. Jones. K. 'Lost in Translation: Jean-Michel in the (Re)Mix,' *In* Mayer, M. (ed.) *Basquiat*, London & New York: Merrell, 2005 p.144
4. Tate, G. 'He is truly free who is free from the need to be free: a survey and consideration of black male genius,' *In* Golden, T. (ed.) *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994 p.113
5. Filmed interview featured in *Jean-Michel Basquiat: the Radiant Child*. Film. Dir. Tamra Davis. Arthouse Films, 2010
6. Ibid

7. Hebdige, D. 'welcome to the Terrordome: Jean-Michel Basquiat and the 'Dark' Side of Hybridity,' In Marshall, R. (ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993 p.80
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Tate, G. 1993 p.58
11. Basquiat, Jean-Michel. 'Illuminations; interview with Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat 1986' [Online]<http://www.illuminationsmedia.net> [1st October 2013]
12. Tate, G. 1993 p.58
13. Psychoanalytic theories of art have focused attention on the notion of the Gaze, examining the process of looking. As well as those elements involved in the reception of works of art, which take into account for example; gender, race and class as factors affecting reception, feminist theorists have focused on the way in which paintings such as Manet's *Olympia*, 1863 disrupt the (predominantly male) Gaze on account of the way in which the subject appears to stare in a challenging manner at the viewer. In *Olympia*, the nude female subject, a prostitute, subverts societal mores of the time, concerning the depiction of the female form. This painting was reinterpreted in 1990 by Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura, who by situating himself in the work, disrupts ideologies of gender, sexuality and race (see D'Alleva, A. 2012 p.113).
14. Hall, S. 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' In Rutherford, J (ed.) *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990 pp.222 – 237
15. Hall, S. 1990 p.225
16. Hall, S. 1990 p.226
17. Julien, I. & Mercer, K. 'De Margin and De Centre' In Morley, D. & Chen, K. (ed.s) *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London & New York: Routledge, 1996 p.451.
18. Their study compares the cinematic version of Hanif Kureishi's realistic representation of modern, urban life, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, 1985 with that of E.M. Forster's idealised representation of British colonial experience, *A Passage to India*, 1982 highlighting the contrast between fact and fiction, and challenging notions of British cultural experience as self-contained and monolithic.
19. Hall, S. 1990 p.226
20. Hall, S. 1990 p.228
21. In spontaneously producing this hastily created work as a gift, Basquiat was perpetuating the modernist tradition whereby artists such as Gauguin and Van Gogh, exchanged portraits with one another as tokens of allegiance. This act hints at Basquiat's study of art history, evident in so much of his working practice.
22. Saggese, J.M. 2014 p.32
23. *Basquiat*. Film. Dir. J. Schnabel. Brandt, P. 1996
24. Sotheby's auction catalogue 2014 [Online]  
<http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2014/contemporary-art-evening-sale-n09141/lot.70.html> [23.3.16]
25. Warhol's screen-print discussed here is one of a series of two; in the other work the various Polaroids are jumbled, further accentuating the depiction of the subject as broken and fragmented. Warhol produced a number of portraits of young artists of this period, including Schnabel, Haring, Salle and Clemente. Noticeably it is only the portrait of Basquiat which is constructed in this fragmented form. (See Geldzahler, H. & Rosenbloom, R. *Andy Warhol Portraits*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1994).
26. Gates, H.L. Preface In Golden, T. (ed.) 1994 p. 13
27. In 2014 Paige Powell, a 1980s socialite and friend of Andy Warhol who briefly dated Basquiat in 1982 published a series of personal, nude photographs of the artist, in an attempt to recreate herself as a photographer. Following their exhibition in New York, the photographs were posted on the internet, adding to the numerous online images which for many represent the persona of Basquiat. The sale of these photographs might be regarded as a further example of the way in which the white New York avant-garde colonised the life and work of the artist.
28. The term YBA refers to the Young British Artists working between 1988 and 2008 (1988 marks the date of the Freeze exhibition in London, featuring the work of artists including Damien Hurst and Sarah Lucas). This group of artists are notable for their ground-breaking work and successful self-promotion.
29. See Chapter 1, note 6
30. In the spring of 1987 Basquiat agreed to walk the catwalk for Japanese designers Comme Des Garçons, known for their avant-garde distressed fabrics and asymmetrical cutting which gave their clothing a unique style. The company developed close working links with artists and gallerists, developing a reputation amongst the creative intelligentsia.
31. O'Hagan, S. 'When Jazz Met Rock' In *The Observer Magazine*, 4 September 2016. O'Hagan's review of Amelia Davis' book *Jazz Festival*, London: Reel Art Press, 2016 chronicles the work of photographer Jim Marshall.
32. Mallouk, S. Quoted in Saggese, J.M. 2014 p.18
33. *Downtown '81*. Film. Dir. Edo Bertoglio. Maripol, 2001. See Chapter 1.
34. Parmar, P. 'Black Feminism: The Politics of Articulation' In Rutherford, J. (ed.) *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990 pp.101-126

35. Sacha Jenkins 2015 film *Fresh Dressed* examines the relationship between racial identity and fashion in the emerging hip-hop culture of New York during the 1970s to the present day. The film examines the way in which working class black Americans living in the city during the 1980s, valued the social status attached to premium label designer clothing, and sought to disrupt stereotypical assumptions reading status through the wearing of labels such as Ralph Lauren, usually associated through product branding with ideas of elitism.
36. Ibid. p.116
37. As discussed in Chapter 2, Kobena Mercer's term 'the stereotypical grotesque' describes the way in which some artist, such as Ofili and Kara Walker, rather than avoiding racial stereotypes, have chosen to include and exaggerate them in their work to the point of critical explosion (Mercer, K. *Welcome to the Jungle*, 1994).
38. Saggese, J.M. 2014 pp.24 – 25
39. Sirmans, F. 2005 p.94
40. Whilst enjoying the lifestyle afforded by the financial rewards of his work, Basquiat was often critical of the monetary gains made by art dealers. Eric Fretz' online Basquiat blog ([www.basquiatbiography.com](http://www.basquiatbiography.com)) records that, at a recent auction the painting *Untitled (Devil)*, 1982 sold for \$57.3, a record price for a Basquiat work so far. The work was created during the artist's stay in Modena, Italy at the invitation of gallerist Emilio Mazzoli. Basquiat's dealer at this time, Annina Nosei arranged the visit, where Basquiat was to paint a number of works to be exhibited in Mazzoli's gallery. Although Basquiat, produced several prestigious works in Modena, including *Profit I* and *Boy and Dog in a Johnnypump*, he did not enjoy the experience, describing: 'They set it up for me so I'd have to make eight paintings in a week, for the show the next week... It was like a factory, a sick factory...I hated it.' With characteristic irony, Basquiat titled *Profit I*, with a punning reference to a previous painting *Prophet I*, alluding to the financial profit he knew Mazzoli would make from his work.
41. Gray, H. 'Black Masculinity and Visual Culture' In Golden, T. (ed.) 1994 p.175
42. Ibid. p.176
43. In contemporary rap music the original gangsta (OG) is a role played by numerous rap and hip-hop artists such as Tupac Shakur and Snoop Dogg. Gangsta rap draws upon common misrepresentations of black males as criminals, and re-works these historic tropes into new tropes of menace. Whilst challenging dominant white stereotypes, these new constructs are founded on traditional working class values of heterosexuality and gender difference which are unstable and problematic.
44. Hall, S. 1990 p.235
45. Ofili, C. Quoted in Nesbitt, J. (ed.) *Chris Ofili*, London: Tate Publishing, 2010 p.15
46. Nesbitt, J. 'Beginnings' In Nesbitt, J. (ed.) 2010 p.9
47. Enwezor, O. 'The Vexations and Pleasures of Colour: Chris Ofili's 'Afro-muses' and the Dialectic of Painting,' In Nesbitt, J.(ed.) 2010 p.68
48. The term blaxploitation (combining the words black and exploitation) is popularly used to refer to an American 1970s film genre which featured black actors and soul or funk music soundtracks. Examples include *Shaft*, 1971. Although the films were originally targeted at an urban black population, they were later criticised by black activists for perpetuating negative stereotypes. Ofili's series of paintings featuring the caricature *Captain Shit*, draws upon Marvel comic heroes, the film character *Shaft* and 1970s soul singers in creation of the subject.
49. Enwezor, O. 'Shattering the Mirror of Tradition: Chris Ofili's Triumph of Painting at the 50th Venice Biennale,' In Chris Ofili, New York: Rizzoli, 2009 p.142.
50. Ibid.
51. Golden, T. & Ofili, C. in 'Conversation' In Chris Ofili, 2009 p. 249.
52. Saunders, R. 'Black is a Color' [Online] <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug01/westkaemper/callaloo/gallery6> [24 August 1915]
53. Golden, T. *Freestyle*, New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001 p.14
54. Saggese, J.M. 2014 p.59
55. Byrd, C. 'Is there a "post-black" art? Investigating the legacy of the "Freestyle" show?' In 'SOURCE: Art Papers 26 no6
56. Golden, T. 'The Status of Difference: Post-Black Art Now,' Tate lecture 14 May, 2009, Tate Modern, London [Online] [www.tate.org.uk/blogs&channell](http://www.tate.org.uk/blogs&channell) [23.05.16]
57. Enwezor, O. 2010 pp.64 – 78
58. For examples of Walker's work see Hannaman, J. (ed.) *Kara Walker: Go to Hell or Atlanta, Whichever Comes First*, London: Victoria Miro Gallery, 2010 or McEvilley, T. & Vergne, P., *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, Minneapolis: Walker Arts Center, 2007.
59. Enwezor, O. 2010 pp.64 – 78
60. Following a move from London to Trinidad in 2005 Ofili abandoned his earlier style of work characterised by detail in both content and use of media in favour of a simplistic, almost abstracted expressionism focused on subtle use of colour. His Blue Rider series of paintings from 2005, sombre explorations of form in hues of blue and silver, are examples of this new working practice.
61. Geldzahler, H, 2005, p.53

## Chapter 5

1. Jean-Michel Basquiat quoted in McGuigan, C, 'New Art, New Money,' [Online] <http://www.newyorktimes.com> [4 April 2013]
2. Hoban, P. *Basquiat A Quick Killing in Art*, America: Quartet Books, 1998 p.306-319. Hoban quotes several of Basquiat's friends and acquaintances describing Basquiat's attitude and behaviour during this year, as he travelled around whilst submerging ever more deeply into the throes of his addiction to a lethal mix of narcotics and alcohol.
3. It is important to note that whilst I have used my analysis of these final paintings to conclude this study, one cannot assume that Basquiat himself regarded these as final works. As a young man Basquiat continued to be a prolific painter up to the time of his unexpected death, and several of the works discussed in this chapter show his exploration of new themes (also seen in his last known painting *Dry Cell*, 1988, not analysed here due to lack of available images). Recent exhibitions of his work show Basquiat's broad reaching creative interests which he may well have pursued further had he lived.
4. See for example *Untitled (Car Crash)*, 1981 (Pl.4)
5. Dreyfuss, H. *Symbol Sourcebook: An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972. The symbol used repeatedly in *Eroica II* to represent the phrase 'man dies' is taken from a section of symbols relating to family life. Marshall notes the way in which Basquiat increasingly incorporated symbols from Dreyfuss' book in his work from 1986 onwards.
6. Saggese, J.M. *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art*, California: University of California Press, 2014 p.110 Saggese explores in depth Basquiat's interest in the works of the Beat writers, and the influence this had on his work, although she does not discuss the *Eroica* paintings. She quotes photographer Jérôme Schlomoff, who photographed Basquiat in Paris in 1988, describing how the artist insisted on being pictured holding a battered copy of Kerouac's book *The Subterraneans*, explaining that the book was not 'an extraneous object' but 'was everything to him at this difficult stage of his life.'
7. See Saggese, J. M. 2014 and Hoban, P. 1998
8. Jones, K. 'Lost in Translation: Jean-Michel in the (Re)Mix' In Mayer, M. (ed.) *Basquiat*, London: Merrell, 2005 p.175
9. Kertess, K. 'The Word,' In Warsh, L. (ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat: the Notebooks*, New York: Art & Knowledge, 1993 p. 17
10. Warsh, L. 1993 p.7
11. Buchhart, D. 'Basquiat's Notebooks: Words and Knowledge, Scratched and Sampled,' In Buchhart, D. & Bloom, T.L. (ed.s) *Basquiat: the Unknown Notebooks*, Brooklyn Museum, 2015 p27
12. Jean-Michel Basquiat quoted in interview in Geldzahler 'Art: From Subways to SoHo, Jean-Michel Basquiat,' In Chiappini, R (ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, Italy: Skira, 2005. In Chiappini, 2005 p.40
13. Basquiat is, of course, not the only artist to include writing as a discrete form within their repertoire; Picasso wrote daily from the age of 54, and Tracey Emin is prolific in her written output, integrating the written word into her art using various media, and publishing poetry, journals and biographical writings.
14. Buchhart, D. 'Against all Odds,' In *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Now's the Time*, Munich, London, New York: DelMonico Books, 2015 p.19.
15. Davvetas, D. 'Lines, Chapters and Verses,' In Warsh, L. (ed.) 1993 p.31
16. Ibid
17. As for example in *Untitled, (Study for Treatise on the Veil)*, 1970
18. Thompson, R.F. 'Royalty, Heroism and the Streets: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat' In Marshall, R. (ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, New York: Whitney, 1993 p.32
19. Thompson, R.F. noted in Saggese, J.M, 2014 p.136. Thompson suggested that future scholars of Basquiat's work explore this idea in more depth.
20. It is not my intention to provide an in-depth discussion on the writings of Derrida within the context of this study; detailed examinations of Derrida's theories can be found, for example in Kamuf, P. (ed.) *A Derrida Reader*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991 or Derrida, J. *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998
21. Basquiat, Jean-Michel in *Jean-Michel Basquiat: the Radiant Child*, film. Dir. Tamra Davis. Arthouse Films 2010
22. Beethoven is believed to have changed the title of the piece after hearing of Napoleon making himself Emperor of France in 1804, either because he believed this made Bonaparte no longer a humanist libertarian but a tyrant, or because he did not want to risk losing the fee from a royal patron for composing the great work.
23. Analyses of *Untitled (Caesar)*, 1981 (Pl.9) in Ch. 1 and *Obnoxious Liberals*, 1982 (Pl.19) in Ch.2.
24. This is noted by Kertess in his discussion of the poem *Untitled (Celebrity Heroin Addict)*, 1982-3 contained within Basquiat's notebooks. In this poem Basquiat invites the reader to select from listed options A-C, to decide whether a celebrity was, or is still a junkie, or is trying to quit. See Kertess, K. and Buchhart, D. 2015 Pl.242.
25. Warsh, L. (ed.) *Jean-Michel Basquiat: the Notebooks*, Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015
26. Buchhart, D. 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: A revolutionary caught between everyday life, knowledge and myth,' In Kertess, K. and Buchhart, D. 2015 p.28

27. For example, Emmerling, L. *Basquiat*, Los Angeles: Taschen, 2008 p.76
28. Hoban, P. 1998
29. Kertess, K. 'Brushes with Beatitude,' In Marshall, R. (ed.) 1993 p.54. Kertess bases his observations in discussion of Basquiat's admiration for Burroughs' writing focused on heroin usage, noting that (aside from Picasso's use of opium and Modigliani's addiction to hashish) drug use was uncommon in the art world which favoured alcohol. (This is not strictly accurate as cocaine was extremely popular with upwardly mobile young people during the 1980s). However, heroin was and is largely used by society's underclass, and Kertess notes the way that 'Basquiat played fast and loose with black stereotypes; and heroin's stereotypical connection with blacks and the ghetto were surely not lost on him.'
30. Hoban, P. 1998 p.302-303
31. Ibid.
32. Basquiat, Jean-Michel in Jean-Michel Basquiat: the Radiant Child, film. Dir. Tamra Davis. Arthouse Films 2010. Suzanne Mallouk tells of how she visited MoMA with Basquiat in 1982, and watched him sprinkle bottled water on the gallery floor (she believed this to be a 'voodoo trick') as he complained, 'There are no black men in museums... This is another white man's cotton plantation.' Mallouk states, 'I realized he must have been to the MoMA millions of times... Jean knew every inch of that museum, every painting, every room. I was astonished at his knowledge and intelligence and at how twisted and unexpected his observations could be.' Clement, J. *Widow Basquiat*, New York: Broadway Books, 2014 p.38
33. Several of Basquiat's paintings made during 1982 reflect his study of the works of other artists, for example; *Three Quarters of Olympia Minus the Servant*, and *Untitled (Detail of Maid from Olympia)* are direct references to the work of Degas and Manet.
34. Hoffmann, F. Jean-Michel Basquiat Drawing: Work from the Schorr Family Collection, New York: Acquavella Rizzoli, 2014 p.125
35. Ibid. Hoffmann recalls how, during the print making process he became concerned that the acetates, which had been tacked to the wall, were lying on the studio floor amongst a litter of 'sheets of drawing paper, photocopies of drawings, paints and oilsticks... music cassettes, (and) cigarette butts.' Offering to place the acetates back on the wall, he was told by Basquiat that he would like them left. Eventually, 'Another week passed, and Jean-Michel said that the acetates now again tacked to the wall, were ready for printing. Not only had (he) drawn images and texts on the acetates, but their life on the studio floor had become part of the completed images... the random markings resulting from lying on the studio floor would not only complement Basquiat's drawn images, but would also give these works a 'patina' – as though they were as old as the sources they referenced.'
36. Thompson, R.F. In Marshall, R. (ed.) 1993 p.39
37. See Hoffmann, F. (ed.) 2014 which includes plates of many such studies made by Basquiat after da Vinci.
38. Marshall, R. 'Repelling Ghosts,' In Marshall, R. (ed.) 1993 p.23. Marshall notes that most information regarding Basquiat's source material comes from Brian Gormley, an artist and friend of Basquiat's during his lifetime, who has recorded and collected the artist's most used sources including with the text on Leonardo, Dreyfuss' *Symbol Sourcebook*, Brentje's *African Rock Art*, Gray's *Anatomy*, Paul Richer's *Artistic Anatomy* and H.W. Jansen's *History of Art*.
39. The practice of using lye to relax black hair, as won by Cole, was popular but involved an extremely painful process, often resulting in severe burns to the scalp. In the 1960s many black activists, including Malcolm X, denounced the practice as degradation of the self, suggesting that white ideals of beauty are in some way superior to black. This issue remains the subject of much debate today; discussed by Zadie Smith in her 2000 novel *White Teeth*, and has been explored in visual art by David Hammons and Ellen Gallagher.
40. Enwezor, O. 'Shattering the Mirror of Tradition: Chris Ofili's Triumph of Painting at the 50<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale,' In Chris Ofili, New York: Rizzoli, 2009 – see Chapter 4 note 44
41. Smith, R. 'Riding with Death: Basquiat's Re-possession of Aristotle,' [Online] [www.ncurproceedings.org/ojs/index.php/NCUR2013/article/download](http://www.ncurproceedings.org/ojs/index.php/NCUR2013/article/download) [1.1.2014]. I also note the dynamic of rider/ridden in relation to the Voudon belief that those possessed by spirits are seen as being ridden by the spirit, and have considered the relevance of this idea in light of Basquiat's interest in Voudon ritual. However, I do not judge there to be any meaningful connection between this idea and the painting.
42. Basquiat, G. 'Gerard Basquiat in His Own Words,' [Online] <https://amandagaston.files.wordpress.com> [23.12.16]
43. The provenance of the painting, which sold for £1,273,250 at Sotheby's, London on 25 June, 2009 describes the work as signed and dated on the reverse and lists the Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York as the original owner of the painting, although there is no reference to the work being shown there.
44. Thompson, R.F. 1983, p.19
45. Lawrence, L. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. Levine suggests that the character Br'er Rabbit represents the American slave who is forced to use his wits to survive the cruelties inflicted upon him by the slave owner.
46. Jones, K. In Mayer, M. (ed.) 2005 p.177
47. The EY Exhibition: Wifredo Lam, Tate Modern, 14.9.16 – 8.1.17
48. Wifredo Lam quoted in 'Who is Wifredo Lam?' [Online] [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk) [1.12.16]



49. Chapter 3 notes 58-59
50. Chapter 3 p.71
51. Chapter 3 note 65
52. Sirmans, F. 2014 p.26
53. Thompson, R.F. in Marshall, R. (ed.) 1993 p.32
54. Ibid. p.40

## **Conclusion**

1. Jean-Michel Basquiat, 2005 in Jean-Michel Basquiat: the Radiant Child, film. Dir. Tamra Davis. Arthouse Films 2010
2. Gilroy, P. P.223
3. Gaiman, N. *The Anansi Boys*, New York: Morrow, 2005. The traditional tales of Anansi the spider originated in West Africa and travelled across time and space to the Caribbean where the character of Anansi, half spider, half man, became known as a trickster (similar to the migratory tales of Br'er Rabbit and Exu discussed in this text). Gaiman's fictional account updates the stories to a modern British setting.
4. Jean-Michel Basquiat, 2005 in Jean-Michel Basquiat: the Radiant Child, film. Dir. Tamra Davis. Arthouse Films 2010

## Appendix 1

### Chronology

#### 22 December 1960

Jean-Michel Basquiat is born in Brooklyn, New York to parents Gerard and Matilde Basquiat.

As a child Basquiat is a frequent visitor to the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art with his mother who encourages his early interest in drawing. Throughout his childhood Basquiat creates cartoons and comic books, aspiring to become a cartoonist.



Fig.1 Photograph of Jean-Michel Basquiat, New York, 1965

#### May 1968

Basquiat is hit by a car whilst playing in the street and suffers a number of injuries which lead to the removal of his spleen and a month in hospital. During this time his mother gives him a copy of the book *Gray's Anatomy* which inspires both his interest in anatomical drawing and the name of the band he was to form in 1979. Basquiat's parents separate and henceforth Basquiat lives with his father and two sisters.

#### 1974

Gerard Basquiat and his children move to Puerto Rico due to Gerard's work.

#### 1976-1977

Following the family return to Brooklyn Basquiat begins attending City-as-School, a school for gifted children. It is here that Basquiat meets Al Diaz with whom he creates the SAMO graffiti. In 1977 Basquiat leaves school shortly before graduating.

#### 1978

Basquiat leaves home. With no fixed abode he begins selling hand-made postcards and painted t-shirts in the SoHo area of New York whilst continuing to create the SAMO graffiti. He

becomes well known in downtown clubs popular with performers such as Madonna and Debbie Harry, film-maker Patti Astor and gallerists such as Diego Cortez. Basquiat befriends street artist Fred Braithwaite (aka Fab 5 Freddy) who introduces him to the formative hip-hop scene. During this period Basquiat approaches Andy Warhol and Henry Geldzahler in an attempt to sell his postcards.

On 11 December 1978 an article is published in the Village Voice newspaper inviting SAMO to identify himself.

## 1979

Basquiat ends his collaboration with Diaz and the graffiti SAMO IS DEAD appears around SoHo. He meets Glenn O'Brien, host of cable television show TV Party, and makes several appearances on the show, identifying himself as Mr. SAMO and claiming responsibility for the SAMO graffiti. Basquiat forms an experimental sound band *Gray* with friends but also continues to develop his own paintings and sell them on the street. Diego Cortez sells several of Basquiat's early works and formally introduces him to Geldzahler who becomes a collector of Basquiat's work.

## 1980

Basquiat's work is shown for the first time in the *Times Square Show*, a group exhibition of graffiti inspired art, which also features the work of David Hammons and Kenny Scharf.

Basquiat is chosen to play a semi-autobiographical role as a young painter in Maripol's film *Downtown 81* featuring Debbie Harry.

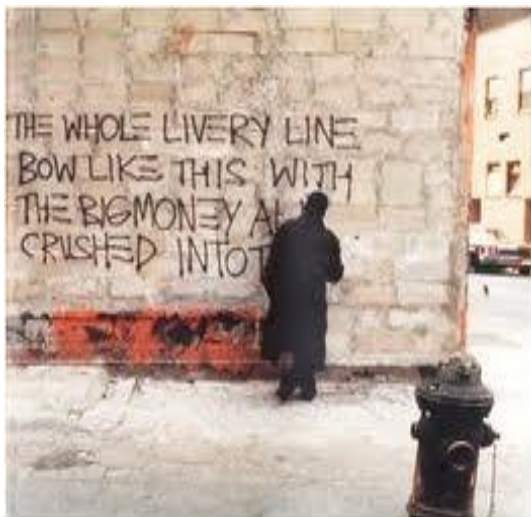


Fig. 2 Still image from *Downtown 81* showing Basquiat writing SAMO graffiti, New York, 1980

## 1981

Basquiat's work is included in the prestigious *New York/New Wave* exhibition at PS1, Long Island inspires the interest of dealers Annina Nosei and Bruno Bischofberger. In May he travels to Italy for his first solo show at Galeria d'Arte Emilio Mazzoli in Modena. His work is shown in

several other New York exhibitions during this year and in September he establishes a studio in the basement of Nosei's gallery. In December Rene Ricard's article on Basquiat, *The Radiant Child* is published in Art Forum magazine and serves to establish Basquiat's place in the New York art scene.

## 1982

In January Basquiat moves into a loft studio on Crosby Street, SoHo with girlfriend Suzanne Mallouk. In March his first solo exhibition in the USA is shown at Annina Nosei's gallery, New York, his work is featured in another Italian group show and in April he travels to Los Angeles for a solo exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery. In May Basquiat ends his working relationship with Nosei and in June becomes the youngest artist to participate in the international group exhibition *documenta 7* in West Germany. In September Bischofberger exhibits Basquiat's work in Zurich and in November another solo exhibition is shown at Patti Astor's Fun Gallery, New York.

Basquiat co-produces and designs the cover art for a rap record entitled *Beat Bop* with friend Rammellzee. In December Basquiat is photographed by James Van Der Zee.



Fig.3 Basquiat, New York 1982  
Photograph by James Van Der Zee

## 1983

In March Basquiat spends further time in Los Angeles and the Gagosian Gallery host a second solo exhibition of his work and travels to Europe and Japan to attend exhibitions of his work. Basquiat becomes one of the youngest artists to be included in the Whitney Biennial Exhibition.

In August Basquiat moves into a studio leased from Warhol, whom he has befriended, at 57 Great Jones Street. In November Basquiat begins working on a series of collaborative works with Warhol and Francesco Clemente at Bischofberger's suggestion. In December Basquiat returns to Los Angeles where he remains until May 1984.

## 1984

Basquiat spends time working in studios in Market Street, Venice, California and in Maui, Hawaii. Mary Boone joins Bischofberger as one of Basquiat's main art dealers.



Fig. 4 Basquiat, California, 1984.  
Photograph by Steve Torton

In May Basquiat's solo exhibition at the Mary Boone Gallery, New York is a great success and his work is featured in further group shows throughout the year. In September Galerie Bruno Bischofberger hosts *Collaborations – Basquiat, Clemente, Warhol* in Zurich.

In November Basquiat initiates a meeting with R.F. Thompson after reading his book *Flash of the Spirit*.

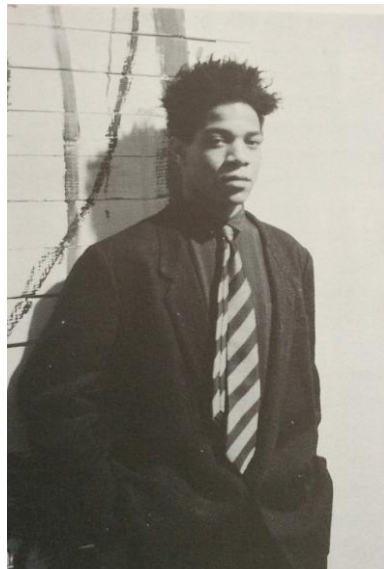


Fig.5 Basquiat, New York, 1984  
Photograph by R.F. Thompson

1985

Basquiat's works continue to be exhibited in further solo shows in New York and Europe and in September a further sixteen collaborative paintings by Basquiat and Warhol are exhibited at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York. Shafrazi promotes the exhibition with contentious posters of the artists in role as boxers.



Fig.6 Warhol & Basquiat, New York, 1985.  
Photograph by Michael Halsband



Fig. 7 Warhol & Basquiat, New York, 1985.  
Photograph by Lizzie Himmel

On 10 February Basquiat appears on the cover of the New York Times Magazine featuring Cathleen McGuigan's article *New Art, New Money: The Marketing of an American Artist*.

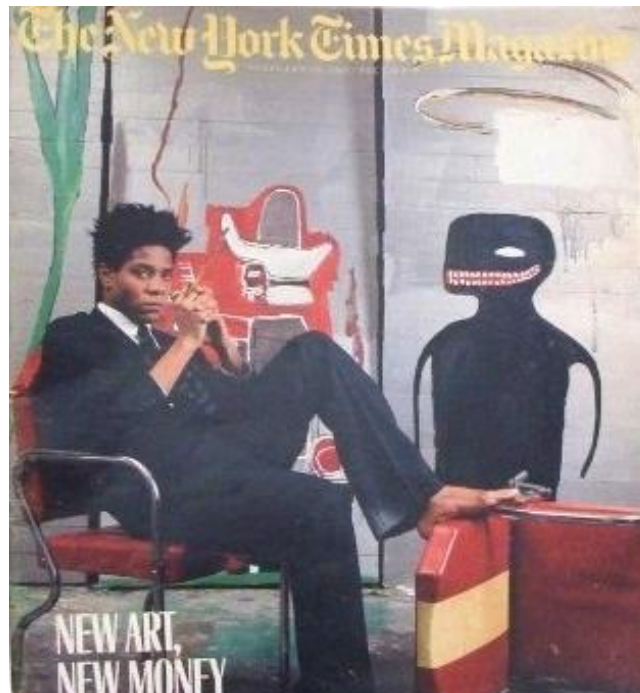


Fig. 8 Cover of the New York Times magazine,  
1985. Photograph by Lizzie Himmel

## 1986

In January Basquiat spends several weeks in Los Angeles for an exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery and in August travels to Africa with girlfriend Jennifer Goode, for an exhibition he has encouraged Bischofberger to arrange in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

## 1988

In January Basquiat attends a solo exhibition of several new paintings including *Eroica I & II* and *Riding with Death*, organised by Vrej Baghoomian at the Cable Street Building, SoHo before the works travel to exhibitions in Europe. Basquiat travels to the shows in Paris and Düsseldorf, before returning with the exhibition to New York in April. From here he travels to New Orleans with African artist Ouattara Watts who he had met in Paris.

In May Basquiat spends several weeks alone in Maui, Hawaii attempting to quit his addiction to heroin. In early June he spends a week in Los Angeles visiting friends before returning to New York. During this week Basquiat is interviewed on camera by Tamra Davis for her feature length documentary film *Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child*, (released 2009) and appears healthy and relaxed.

On 12 August 1988 Basquiat, aged twenty-seven, is found dead at his home on Great Jones Street by girlfriend Kelle Inman; the cause of death an accidental drugs overdose.

Jean-Michel Basquiat's funeral was held on 17 August and the artist was buried in the Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn. At a memorial service held on 5 November Basquiat's friend Fred Braithwaite commemorated the artist's life saying; '*Jean-Michel lived like a flame. He burned really bright. Then the fire went out. But the embers are still hot.*'



Fig. 9 Basquiat at the Cable Building exhibition, New York, 1988. Photograph by Mark Sink



## **Appendix 2**

### **Exhibition history**

#### **Solo exhibitions**

##### **1981**

Galleria Emilio Mazzoli, Modena, Italy 'SAMO,' May 23 – June 20

##### **1982**

Annina Nosei Gallery, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' March 6 – April 1

Larry Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: Paintings,' April 8 – May 8

Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zürich 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' September 11 – October 9

Galleria Mario Diacono, Rome 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' October 23 – November 20

Fun Gallery, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' November 4 – December 7

Galerie Delta, Rotterdam 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' December

##### **1983**

Anina Nosei Gallery, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' February 12 – March 3

Larry Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: New Paintings,' March 8 – April 2

Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zürich 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' September 24 – October 22

Akira Ikeda Gallery, Tokyo 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' November 14 – December 10

##### **1984**

Mary Boone – Michael Werner Gallery, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' May 5 – May 26

The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: Paintings 1981 – 1984,' August 11 – September 23. Travelled to Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, December 15 – January 27, 1985; Museum Boymansvan Beuningen, Rotterdam, February 9 – March 31, 1985

Carpenter & Hochman Gallery, Dallas 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: New Paintings,' September 20 – October 20

Galleri V, Stockholm 'Jean-Michel Basquiat'

##### **1985**

Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zürich 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' January 19 – February 16

University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' January – March. Travelled to La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, California, May 4 – June 16

Mary Boone- Michael Werner Gallery, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' March 2 – March 23

Akira Ikeda Gallery, Tokyo 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' December 2 – 25

Anina Nosei Gallery, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: Paintings from 1982,' December 14– January 9, 1986

## **1986**

Larry Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' January 7 – February 11

Fay Gold Gallery, Atlanta 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: Drawings,' February 7 – March 5

Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zürich 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: Drawings,' April 26 – June 30

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg 'Jean-Michel Basquiat 1984 - 1986,' July 27 – August 31

Centre Culturel Français d'Abidjan, Ivory Coast 'J.M. Basquiat,' October 10 - November 7

Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hannover 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: To Repel Ghosts' November 28– January 25, 1987

Galerie Delta, Rotterdam 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' November

## **1987**

Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' January 10 – February 7

Akira Ikeda Gallery, Tokyo 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: New Works,' February 7 – February 28

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: Drawings,' May 23 - June 13

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: Drawings' June 6 – 31

PS Gallery, Tokyo 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' October 8 – December 4

## **1988**

Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' January 9 – February 10

Galerie Beaubourg, Paris 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: Peintures 1982 – 1987,' January 9 – February 16

Galerie Hans Mayer, Düsseldorf 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' January 12 – March 15

Galerie Michael Haas, Berlin 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' February 5 – March 12

Vrej Baghoomian Gallery, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' April 29 – June 11

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: Paintings – Drawings,' June 15 – July 26

Gallery Schlesinger Ltd. New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat Paintings,' November

Anina Nosei Gallery, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: Memorial Exhibition,' December 3 – January 14, 1989

## **1989**

Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hannover, W. Germany 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: Das Zeichnerische Werk,' September 15 – October 22

Vrej Baghoomian Gallery, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' October 21 – November 25

Galerie Enrico Navarra, Paris 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' November 8 – December 31

## **1990**

Galerie Le Gall Peyroulet, Paris 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: Oeuvres sur papier,' January 23 – March 3

Galerie Fabien Boulakia, Paris 'Basquiat,' September 27 – November 3

Robert Miller Gallery, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: A Survey of Drawings,' November 6 – December 1

## **1991**

PS Gallery, Tokyo 'Oil Paintings, Drawings etc.' March 4 – May 17

## **1992**

Vrej Baghoomian Gallery, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' February 8 – March 7

Galerie Eric van de Weghe, Brussels 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' April 9 – May 23

Musée Cantini, Marseilles 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' July 3 – September 21

Whitney Museum of Modern Art, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' October 23– February 13 1993. Travelled to Menil Collection, Houston March – May, Des Moines Art Centre, Iowa, May – August, and Montgomery Museum of Fine Art, Alabama, November – January 1994.

## **1994**

Newport Harbor Museum, California 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Blue Ribbon Paintings.' Travelled to Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, Massachusetts; Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, 1995; Neuberger Museum, New York, 1996.

## **1996**

Serpentine Gallery, London 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' March 6 – April 21. Travelled to Palacio Episcopal de Malaga, Spain.

**1997**

Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Taiwan 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' January – June

Musée Maillol à Paris, Paris 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: œuvres sur papier,' May 23 – October 15

**2001**

Museum Würth, Germany 'Jean-Michel Basquiat – The Mugrabi Collection,' September – June

**2003**

Musée Maillol à Paris, Paris 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: histoire d'une œuvre,' June 27 – October 23

**2005**

Brooklyn Museum, New York 'Basquiat,' March 11 – June 5, 2005. Travelled to Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, June 17 – October 10

Museo d'Arte Moderna, Lugano, Italy 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' March 20 – June 14

**2006**

Deitch Projects, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat 1981: The Studio of the Street,' May 4 – May 27

Fondazione La Triennale di Milano, Milan, Italy 'The Jean-Michel Basquiat Show,' September 19 – January 28, 2007

**2008**

Fundacion Marcelino Botin, Santander, Spain 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: To Repel Ghosts,' July 11 – September 14

**2010**

La Galerie Pascal Lansberg, 'Basquiat Paris,' December

The Fondation Beyeler, Basel 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' May 9 - September 5

**2011**

Musée d'Arte Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' October 15 - 30 January 2011

**2013**

Kukje Gallery, Seoul 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' February 14 – March 31

Gagosian Gallery, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' February 7 – April 6  
Gagosian Gallery, Hong Kong 'Jean-Michel Basquiat,' May 21 – August 10

Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: Paintings and Drawings,' June 3 – September 13

## **2014**

The Acquavella Galleries, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat Drawing: Work from the Schorr Family Collection,' May 1 - June 13

Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans, 'Basquiat and the Bayou,' October 25, 2014 – January 25

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: Now's the Time,' February 7 – May 10.  
Travelled to the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao July 3 – November 1, 2015

## **2015**

Brooklyn Museum, New York 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks,' April 3 – August 23

## **2016**

Nahmad Contemporary, New York 'Words Are All We Have: Paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat,' 2 May – 18 June

Museo del Culture, Milan, 'Jean-Michel Basquiat's Graffiti and Late Works,' 5 October – 19 February

## **Group Exhibitions**

### **1980**

Colab (Collaborative Projects Inc.) & Fashion Moda (organisers) New York, 'Times Square Show,' July

### **1981**

P.S. 1 Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Long Island City, New York, 'New York, New Wave,' February 15 – April 5

Mudd Club, New York 'Lower Manhattan Drawing Show,' February 22 – March 15, 1981

Mudd Club, New York 'Beyond Words: Graffiti Based-Rooted-Inspired Works,' April 9 – 24

Anina Nosei Gallery, New York 'Public Address,' October 31 – November 19

Anina Nosei Gallery, New York 'Group Show,' December 19, 1981 – January 24

## 1982

University Art Gallery, San Diego State University, California 'Body Lana gauge: Current Issues in Figuration,' March 13 – April 10

University Fine Arts Galleries, Florida State University, Florida 'New York,' March 17 – April 17

Galleria Civica del Comune di Modena, Italy 'Transvanguardia: Italia/America,' March 21 – May 2

Mura Aureliane da Porta Metronia a Porta Latina, Rome 'Avanguardia Transvanguardia,' April – July

Sydney James Galleries, New York 'New Work,' May 5 – June 5

Marlborough Gallery, New York 'The Pressure to Paint,' June 4 – July 9

Anina Nosei Gallery, New York 'Group Show,' June 5 – 30

Alexander F. Milliken Gallery, New York 'Fast,' June 11 – July 15

Kasel, W. Germany 'Documenta 7,' June 19 – September 23

Blum Helman Gallery, New York 'Drawings,' June 23 – July 30

Sidney Janis Gallery, New York 'The Expressionist Image: American Art from Pollock to Today,' October 9 – 30

The Chrysler Museum, Virginia 'Still Modern After All These Years,' October 22 – December 12

Kestner-Gesellschaft, W. Germany 'New York Now,' November 26, 1982 – January 23

Anina Nosei Gallery, New York 'Group Show,' December 18, 1982 – January 6

## 1983

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York 'Champions,' January – February

Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York '1983 Biennial Exhibition,' March 15 – May 29

Monique Knowlton Gallery, New York 'Intoxication,' April 9 – May 7

Kunstmuseum Luzern, Switzerland 'Back to the USA: Amerikanische Kunst der Siebziger und Achziger,' May 29 – July 31

Anina Nosei Gallery, New York 'Group Show,' June 11- July 29

Fashion Moda, New York 'Food for the Soup Kitchens,' October 1-15

The Seibu Museum of Art, Tokyo 'Mary Boone and Her Artists,' October 6-8

Greenville County Museum of Art, S. Carolina 'From the Streets,' October 25 – November 20

Galerie Beyeler, Basel 'Expressive Malerei nach Picasso,' October – December

Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, New York 'Written Imagery Unleashed in the Twentieth Century,' November 1983 – January 1984

Sidney Janis Gallery, New York 'Post-Graffiti,' December 1-31

Mary Boone Gallery, New York 'Paintings,' December 3-31

## **1984**

New York Department of Cultural Affairs, New York 'Van Der Zee Memorial Show: James Van Der Zee, 1886 – 1983,' February 1 – March 2

Sidney Janis Gallery, New York 'Modern Expressionists: German, Italian, and American Painters,' March 10 – April 7

Center Gallery of Bucknell University, Pennsylvania 'Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art,' April 13 – June 6.

Galeria Comunale d'Arte Moderna di Bologna, Italy 'Arte di Frontiera: N.Y. Graffiti,' May 1 – June 10

Indianapolis Museum of Art 'Painting and Sculpture Today,' May 1- June 10

Museum of Modern Art, New York 'An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture,' May 17 – August 19

The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Connecticut 'American Neo-Expressionists,' May 20 – September 9

Willard Gallery, New York 'Drawings,' September 5 – October 6

Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zürich 'Collaborations: Basquiat, Clemente, Warhol,' September – October

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC 'Content: A Contemporary Focus 1975 - 1984,' October 4 – January 6, 1985

Kitakyushu Municipal Museum of Art, Japan 'Painting Now: the Restoration of Painterly Figuration,' October 6-28

Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania 'The East Village Scene,' October 12 – December 2

Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zürich 'Collaborations: Basquiat and Warhol,' November

Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris 'Figuration Libre France/USA,' December 21 – February 17, 1985

Neue Galerie-Sammlung Ludwig, Aachen, W. Germany 'Aspekte Amerikanischer Kunst Der Gegenwart,'



## **1985**

Akira Ikeda Gallery, Tokyo 'Collaborations: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Francesco Clemente, Andy Warhol,' January 14 - 31

Grande Halle du Parc de la Villette, Paris 'XIII Biennale de Paris,' March 21 – May 21

Annina Nosei Gallery, New York 'The Door,' June 7 – July 7

Segantini Museum, St. Moritz 'Das Oberengadin in der Malerei,' June 20 –October 20

Annina Nosei Gallery, New York 'Drawing the Line: Painting,' September 21 – October 17

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York 'Warhol and Basquiat: Paintings,' September 14 – October 19

Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt 'Vom Zeichnen: Aspekte der Zeichnung 1960 - 1985,' November 19 – January 1, 1986

Knight Gallery, N. Carolina 'Drawings,' December 20 – February 7, 1986

## **1986**

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 'Figure As Subject: the Last Decade, Selections From the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art,' February 13 – June 4

The Art Institute of Chicago, '75<sup>TH</sup> American Exhibition,' March 8 – April 27

Holman Hall Art Gallery, New York 'Contemporary Issues III,' April 2 – 25

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark 'Portrait of a Collector: Stephane Janssen,' April 5 – May 11

Mokotoff Gallery, New York 'Heads,' April – May

Suermonde Ludwig Museum und Museumverein Aachen, W. Germany 'Zeichen, Symbole Graffiti in der Aktuellen Kunst,' July 6 – August 17

Galerie Barbara Farber, Amsterdam 'Esprit de New York Paintings and Drawings,' July 18 - 24

Akira Ikeda Gallery, Tokyo 'Collaborations: Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol,' September 8 - 30

Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt 'Prospekt 86,' September 9 – November 2

The American Museum Association of America, San Francisco 'Focus on the Image: Selections from the Rivendell Collection,' October 5 – February 7, 1987

Wellesley College Museum, Massachusetts '1976 – 1986: Ten Years of Collecting Contemporary American Art, Selections from the Edward R. Downe Jr. Collection,' November 13 – January 18, 1987

Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich 'Collaborations: Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol,' November 15 – January 17, 1987

## **1987**

Los Angeles County Museum of Art 'Avant-Garde in the Eighties,' April 23 – July 12

Fashion Moda, New York 'The East Village Force de Frappe Comes to the South Bronx,' May 9– June 1

56 Bleecker Gallery, New York '16@56: Summer Salon,' July 28 – August 28

San Antonio Art Institute, Texas 'The Frederick R. Weisman Collection: An International Survey,' September 16 – October 16

Anne Plumb Gallery, New York 'Logos,' December 19 – January 23, 1988

## **1988**

Bridge Center for Contemporary Art, Texas 'An Electric Eye: Selections from the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation,' January 11 – December 14

Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence '1900 to Now: Modern Art from Rhode Island Collections,' January 22 – May 1

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 'Figure as Subject: The Revival of Figuration Since 1975,' February 13 – June 4

Paula Allen Gallery, New York 'Bebop,' April 26 – May 27

Boca Raton Museum of Art, Florida 'Modern and Contemporary Master Drawings,' April 29 – May 29

Mayor Rowan Gallery, London 'Collaborations: Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat,' November 11 – January 21, 1989

## **1989**

Rosa Esman Gallery, New York 'Modern and Contemporary Master Drawings,' January 6 – 28

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York 'Words,' January 21 – February 18

Rooseum Malmö, Sweden 'Jean-Michel Basquiat/Julian Schnabel,' April 8 – May 28

Yokohama Museum of Art, Japan 'The Chase Manhattan Bank Collection: 1974 – 1989,' June 18 – October 1

Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles 'A Decade of American Drawing 1980–1989,' July 15– August 26

Hofstra Museum, New York '1979 – 1989: American, Italian, Mexican Art from the Collection of Francesco Pellizzi,' September 8 – November 2

The Washington Project for the Arts, Washington 'The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism,' September 14 – December 30

Didier Imbert Fine Art, Paris 'Warhol- Basquiat Collaborations,' September 28 – November 25

Edward Tootah Gallery, London 'Selected Americans,' November 28 – December 26

## **1990**

Galerie Hadrien-Thomas, Paris 'Selection Americaine,' January 10 – February 24

Michael Kohn Gallery, Santa Monica 'Gesture and Signature,' May 12 – June 16

Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, New York 'The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s,' May 12 – August 19

Nippon Convention Centre, Tokyo 'Pharmakon '90,' July 28 – August 20

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York 'The Last Decade: American Artists of the '80s,' September 15 – October 27

Ho-Am Gallery, Seoul 'Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol,' October

The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Connecticut 'Language in Art,' October 20 – January 6, 1991

Cavaliero Fine Arts, New York 'Works on Paper,' November

Frank Bernarducci Gallery, New York 'Quickdraw: American Master Drawings Since 1959,' November 2 – December 1

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York 'Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat: Paintings,' December 15 – January 26, 1991

## **1991**

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 'The 1980s: A Selected View From the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art,' January 16 – March 24

Enrico Navarra Gallery, New York 'Selected Works,' May 6 – June 20

San José Museum of Art, California 'Compassion and Protest: Recent Social and Political Art from the Eli Broad Family Foundation Collection,' June 1 – August 25

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York 'Drawing Acquisitions, 1980 – 1991: Selection from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art,' June 12 – September 5

Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey, Mexico 'Mito y Magia en America: los Ochenta,' June – September

Robert Miller Gallery, New York 'Portraits on Paper,' June 25 – August 2

Sonje Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea 'Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat,'  
September 14 – October 20

Duke University Museum of Art, N. Carolina 'Art of the 1980s: Selections from the Collection of  
the Eli Broad Family Foundation,' September 20 – January 5, 1992

Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania 'Devil on the Stairs: Looking Back on  
the 1980s,' October 4 – January 5, 1992

Phillipe Brier Gallery, New York 'Domenikos Theokopoulos: A Dialogue,' December 5 – January  
5, 1992

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York 'A Passion for Art: Watercolours and Works on Paper,'  
December 7 – January 25, 1992

Annina Nosei Gallery, New York 'Works on Paper,' December 10 – January 7, 1992

Palazzo del Albere, Museo Provinciale d'Arte, Trento, Italy 'American Artists of the 1980s,'  
December 18 – March 1, 1992

## **1992**

Bomani Gallery and Jernigan Wicker Fine Arts, San Francisco 'Paris Connections: African  
American Artists in Paris,' January 14 – February 29

Museum of Modern Art, New York 'Allegories of Modernism: Contemporary Drawing,'  
February 16 – May 5

The Richard and Marieluise Black Centre for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, New York  
'Passions and Cultures: Selected Works from the Rivendell Collection 1967 – 1991,' April –  
October

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 'The Power of the City/the City of Power,' May  
20 – July 10

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 'Gifts and Acquisitions in Context,' May 22 –  
September 20

## **1993**

Royal Academy of Arts, London 'American Art in the Twentieth Century'

Fine Arts Gallery, University of California 'Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream  
Criticism'

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York 'Extravagant: the Economy of Elegance'

Biennale d'Art Contemporain

Threading Wax Space, New York 'I Am the Enunciator'

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York '1982 – 1983: Ten Years After'

## **1994**

Art Museum, Aspen 'The Shaman as Artist/the Artist as Shaman'

Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont, Paris 'Maîtres Modernes et Contemporains'

Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield 'Art in the Present Tense: the Aldrich's Curational History, 1964 – 1994'

San Antonio Museum of Art, Texas 'The Herman and Harriet Kelley Collection of African American Art'

## **1995**

Bruce Museum, Greenwich 'A New York Time: Drawings of the Eighties'

Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville, Paris 'Passions Privées'

## **1996**

Museum Fridericianum, Kassel 'Warhol, Basquiat, Clemente Collaborations'

John McEnroe Gallery, New York 'Bill Taylor, Philip Guston, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Gary Romarin'

Museum of Modern Art, New York 'Thinking Print: Books to Billboards 1980 – 1995'

Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain 'Comme un oiseau'

Galerie Beaubourg, Venice 'Quelques impressions d'Afrique'

Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli 'Warhol, Basquiat, Clemente Collaborations'

## **1997**

Gagosian Gallery, New York 'Andy Warhol & Jean-Michel Basquiat Collaborations'

Malca Fine Art, New York 'Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kenny Scharf: In Your Face'

Delta Gallery, Rotterdam '35 Jaar: 1962 – 1967'

## **1998**

Mayor Gallery, London '30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Mr. Chow Portrait Collection'

Gagosian Gallery, New York 'Portraits Obscured'

Carré d'Art Musée d'Art Contemporain, Nîmes 'Au fil du Trait: de Matisse à Basquiat'

Kirin Plaza, Osaka 'Basquiat + Haring + Scharf from the Leo Malca Collection'

Delta Gallery, Rotterdam 'Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf'

Espace EDF Bazacle, Toulouse 'L'intracable frontière'

Museum of Art, Yokohama 'Oeuvres sur papier et photographies: La collection Yvon Lambert'

## **1999**

Galerie Enrico Navarra, Paris 'Portrait Collection of Mr. Chow'

Akira Ikeda Gallery, Tokyo 'Contemporary American Art and Ancient Korea/Dreaming II'

Palazzo Bricherasion, Turin 'Pittura Dura: Dal Graffiterismo Street Art'

Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich 'Portraits'

## **2000**

Palazzo Martinengo, Brescia 'Lo sguardo innocente, l'arte, l'infanzia, il 900'

National Portrait Gallery, London 'Painting the Century'

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York 'Off White'

Fondation Maeght, Saint-Paul-de-Vence 'Le Nu au XX Siècle'

## **2002**

Fondation Beyeler, Basel 'Expressif!'

Kunstmuseum, Bergen 'New York Expression'

Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles 'Andy Warhol & Jean-Michel Basquiat: Collaboration Paintings'

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid 'Warhol-Basquiat=Clemente: Obras en Colaboracion'

Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont, Paris 'Accrochage d'hiver: Photographies Contemporains'

Gallery Sho Contemporary Art, Tokyo 'The Exhibition of Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat'

Espace Bellevue, Biarritz 'Les Jeux dans l'art du XX siècle'

## **2003**

Stella Art Gallery, Moscow 'American Figures Between Pop Art and Trans-Avantgarde'

Jan Kruger Gallery, New York 'The Fire Under the Ashes: From Picasso to Basquiat'

## **2004**

Galerie Guereta, Madrid 'Los años 80'

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York 'Picasso, Bacon Basquiat'

Galeria Torbandina, Trieste 'Miquel Barceló, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter'

La Triennale, Milan 'The Andy Warhol Show'

## **2005**

MARTa Herford Museum, Herford 'My (private) HEROES'

Institut Valencià d'Arte Moderne, València 'Fire Under the Ashes'

## **2008**

Museo di Arte Moderna y Contemporáneo di Trento de Rovereto, Italy 'The Jazz Century,'  
November 11- February 15, 2009

## **2009**

Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York 'USA Collected Visions,' March 5 - May 10

Mary Boone Gallery, New York 'A Tribute to Ron Warren,' September 12 - October 24

Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin 'Andy Warhol: The Last Decade,' September 26 - January 3,  
2010

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles 'MOCA's First Thirty Years,' November 15 - May 3,  
2010

Museum of Modern Art, New York 'Looking at Music: Side 2,' June 10 - November 30

## **2010**

Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Maine 'Motion and Emotion: Contemporary Art from  
Gerhard Richter to Chakaia Booker,' January 12 - April 4

Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick 'Basquiat/Warhol,' January 12 - April 4 Gagosian  
Gallery, London 'Crash,' February 11- April 1

Woodward Gallery, New York 'Big Paper Winter,' January 16 - February 27

Tate Liverpool, Liverpool 'Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic,' January 29 – April  
25

Haunch of Venison, New York 'Your History is Not Our History,' March 5 – May 1

Nassau County Museum of Art, New York 'Miró/Dubuffet/Basquiat,' March 13 - May 23

Black Rat Projects, London 'Now's the Time,' April 22 - May 20

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal 'We Want Miles: Miles Davis vs. Jazz,' April 30 -  
August 29



Basel, Germany, 'Art Basel, 2010,' June 16 - 20

Kunsthalle, Vienna 'Street and Studio: From Basquiat to Séripop,' June 25 - October 10

Collection Lambert en Avignon, Paris 'The Masterpieces of the Yvon Lambert Donation,' July 7 - November 11

Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Washington 'The Record,' August 19 - January 23, 2011

Robert Miller Gallery, New York 'Basquiat/Terada/Mapplethorpe, September 23 - October 30

## **2011**

Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Germany 'The 80s Revisited: The Bischofberger Collection,' March 13– June 19

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles 'Art in the Streets,' April 17 – August 8

La Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont, Paris 'Graffiti New York 80's: Group Exhibition,' May 27 – July 20

Gagosian Gallery Rome 'Made In Italy,' May 27 - July 29

Van de Weghe Fine Art Gallery, New York 'Picasso/Basquiat,' May – June

Gagosian Gallery, London 'Olympic Rings,' August

Hunter College Art Galleries, New York, 'Times Square Show Revisited,' September 14 - December 8, 2012

The Smithsonian's National Gallery of Art, Washington DC 'Warhol Headlines,' September 25 - January 2, 2012

The Corcoran Museum, Washington DC '30 Americans,' October 1- February, 2012

## **2012**

Bundeskunsthalle, Museumsmeile Bonn '*Ménage à trois*: Warhol, Basquiat, Clemente,' February 2 - May 20

Louisiana Museum of Contemporary Art, Denmark 'Self-Portrait,' September 14 - January 13, 2013

Museum of Contemporary Art, Jacksonville, Florida 'Refocus: Art of the 1980s,' September 15 - January 6, 2013

Fowler Museum of Contemporary Art, UCLA, Los Angeles 'In Extremis: Death and Life in 21st-Century Haitian Art,' September 16 - January 20, 2013

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 'Regarding Warhol: Sixty Artists, Fifty Years,' September 18 - December 31

El Museo de Barrio/ Studio Museum in Harlem/ Queens Museum of Art 'Caribbean: Crossroads of the World,' October 21 – January 6, 2013

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles 'Blues for Smoke,' October 21 - January 7, 2013

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago 'This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s,' November 15 – March 12 2013

Florida, 'Art Miami, 2012,' December 4 - 9

Gary Nader Arts Center, Miami, Florida 'Masterpieces from the Berardo Collection,' December 5 – 9

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco 'Don't Be Shy,' December 8 - June 2 2013

## **2013**

The Kunstforum, Vienna 'Warhol/Basquiat,' October 16 - February 2, 2014

El Paso Museum of Art, Mexico 'Navigating Art Languages: The James M. Shelton, Jr. Collection,' September 20- February 2, 2014

Ingram Gallery, Nashville, '30 Americans,' October 11–January 12, 2014

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 'Selections from the Permanent Collection,' March 3 - January 27, 2014

Acquavella Galleries, New York, 'Art Basel Miami Beach 2013,' December 4 - 8  
Fondation Maeght, Saint-Paul de Vence, France, 'Adventures of truth: Painting and Philosophy,' June 29 - November 11

Leila Heller Gallery, New York 'Calligraffiti 1984 – 2013,' September - October

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, New York '30 Years, July 25 - August

The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 'I You We,' April 25 – September 1

ACA Galleries, New York 'Textures: The Word in Contemporary Art,' May 4 – June

## **2014**

Nahmad Contemporary Gallery, New York 'Poetics of the Gesture: Schiele, Twombly, Basquiat,' May 2 – June 14

Leila Heller Gallery, New York 'Look at Me: Portraiture from Manet to the Present,' May 6 – August 29

Faggionato Fine Art Gallery, London 'The House,' June 12 – August 15

Tate Liverpool, 'Glenn Ligon: Encounters and Collisions,' 30 June – 18 October

**2015**

Grand Palais, Galeries Nationales, Paris 'Picasso mania,' October 7 – February 29, 2016

**2016**

Fondation de l'Hermitage, Lausanne, 'Summer Exhibition,' 24 July – 30 October

Fresno Art Museum, Los Angeles, 'Enduring Homage: Portraits of a Patron,' 20 May – 28 August

## Bibliography

### Book

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Banksy, *Wall and Piece*, London: Century, 2009

Barrett, M. *The Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault*, London: Polity Press, 1991

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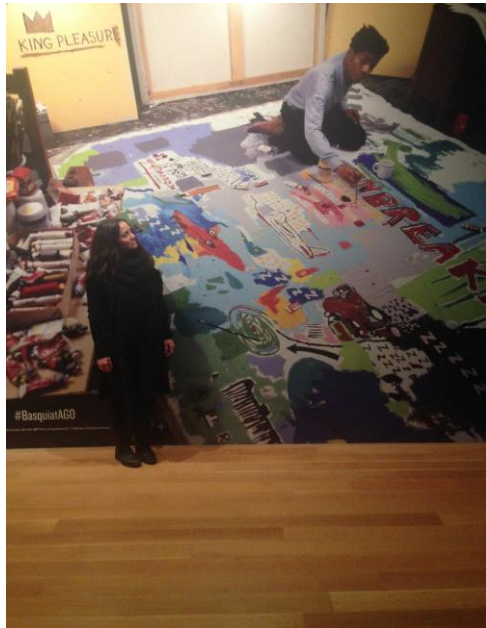
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Photograph of the author with large image of Jean-Michel Basquiat at work, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2015. Photograph M. Asimakis.

